

promise (not to think about love) by the zesty lemon

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Summary: Dating sucks. Or maybe Mike just sucked. He was really starting to wonder at this point. Lucas was right, he hadn't dated the three years since the breakup with his ex. He made up excuses not to date. He didn't have the time, Venus was in retrograde... But when Mike meets El he's out of excuses... and that's terrifying. Coffee shop / B99 style precinct AU

1. promise (not to think about love)

A/N: Welcome! Maybe I watch too much Brooklyn Nine-Nine. Maybe I drink too much coffee (or maybe it's Maybelline?) because that's the only way I could see this strange AU coming to me.

I anticipate this story to be five or six chapters. My goal is to update on a bi-weekly basis. The title of this fic was inspired by the heavenly sound of Basia Bulat's "Promise Not to Think About Love".

(/●ㄣ●)/*:° ✧ I hope you enjoy!

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"Should I ask her out?"

"By the power of Greyskull Dustin, yes!"

"But what if—"

THUNK.

Dustin's self-doubting rant was nipped in the bud by Lucas's head dropping to the table.

He didn't move.

"You know Dustin," Will tried instead, "did anyone ever tell you that you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take?"

Dustin frowned at his well-meaning friend. "Suzie isn't a basketball, Will. Where did you read that? Off a cereal box?"

Will flushed and took a sip of his drink to avoid answering.

"Just ask her out already. This is getting painful." Lucas groaned; his voice muffled from the table top.

"Mike," Dustin whined, "help me out already, tell them it's not that easy, right?" He turned to the last member of the Party sitting at the

table, Mike, who'd been hoping to stay out of it today. No such luck.

They had the same argument with Dustin almost every time they came to *The Dungeon*, their go-to hangout. It was a board game and arcade game lover's dream come true. There were over two hundred available board games to play (including *Dungeons and Dragons*), and over 30 arcade games ranging from classics like *Galaga*, to the more recent *Mario Kart*.

The topic of their near weekly argument:

Suzie, their regular waitress at The Dungeon.

She was a pretty, dark haired girl with a sharp chin and doe brown eyes. Smart as a whip and currently entering her second year of her master's program in condensed matter physics, she had a love of science that rivalled Dustin's. She picked up one or two shifts at The Dungeon to help out her friend, who owned the café. Ever since she'd started waiting tables part time here, she and Dustin had been making eyes at each other, but they were both too nervous to make a move.

"Uh, yeah." Mike grunted belatedly, hoping that was it.

"See?" Dustin looked smugly at Lucas and Will, "Mike agrees with me."

Lucas scoffed and rolled his eyes, finally picking his head up from the table. "Mike also hasn't asked anyone out in three years. He doesn't count."

Mike winced.

Okay, *ouch*.

It's not like that was news to him, but did Lucas have to throw his perpetual singleness in his face?

Dating *sucks*.

Or maybe Mike just sucked, he was really starting to wonder at this point.

Lucas was right, he hadn't dated in three years. He made up excuses not to date. He didn't have the time, he wasn't in the right headspace, Venus was in retrograde... Mike's lack of love life was becoming even more glaringly apparent with Lucas getting a girlfriend and Will shacking up with his serious boyfriend of four years (a really nice guy named Alex).

At least if Dustin was still single, they could be 'eligible bachelors' together (Dustin's words, not Mike's), and it meant that half the Party was still single, and they could joke about being the third wheels.

Judging by how Suzie and Dustin snuck looks at each other, it was only a matter of time before Mike was the only one without a significant other.

He sank down in his seat, glad when Dustin and Lucas resumed bickering. It was only Will who noticed Mike's change in demeanour and shot him a sympathetic look.

Mike was so happy for his friends, but seeing his friends so content in their relationships, Mike was as glad as he was envious. He hadn't been able to date anyone since...

The familiar ring tone startled him out of that particular line of thought. The face of his phone lit up on the table, *MOM* flashing across the bright screen.

Mike's heart sank. Before he could silence the call, Lucas (his now *ex* best friend) swiped to answer his phone and shot him a thumbs up and a big grin.

"Hello? Michael?"

"Hi Mom." Mike greeted, fumbling the phone and simultaneously mouthing *"you dick"* to Lucas, who just snickered.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to his mom, but... he didn't want to talk to his mom. This conversation was going to go one of two ways and he had a sinking feeling he knew which way it was going to go today.

"Michael, how are you?" His mom's chipper voice filtered through the

phone, even loud enough for him to hear her through the din of the crowd.

"I'm good, I'm just at the Dungeon with the guys."

"The Dungeon? It's a Friday night, what about finding some lucky lady to take on a date?"

He cringed, wondering if his mom had a sixth sense for the worst timing ever.

"Mom."

"You know when I was your age, I was already pregnant with Holly—"

"Mom, please." He tried again, a little more desperately this time.

"I want grandbabies before I turn fifty-five, Michael!"

"Mom!" Mike hissed; cheeks flaring in mortification.

His total lack of love life wasn't something he liked to discuss with his best friends, let alone his *mom*. She seemed to be having an existential crisis that she was nearing the big five - five and had no grandchildren in sight despite having three children between the ages of twenty and thirty years old.

He snuck a miserable glance at his friends, wondering if they heard her. If the shit-eating grins on Lucas and Dustin's faces were anything to go by, they definitely had.

Before he could even ask his mom to just not, she hastily said:

"I should let you get back to your friends. Give me a call sometime soon. Love you!"

Mike sighed, feeling the prickle of irritation slipping away.

"Okay, I will. Love you too mom. Bye."

There was a distinct click and Mike sighed, tucking his phone back into his pocket and pointedly ignoring his friends.

"Your mom's right. *When will I get grandbabies, Michael?*" Lucas teased in a poor imitation of Karen's voice.

"I hate it when you do that." Mike groaned, "that doesn't even sound anything like her and besides, I don't think I want to date for a while." He crossed his arms over his chest uncomfortably.

He could sense Lucas's pitying look and it irritated him. So what if he hadn't dated in a few years?

Apparently, it wasn't just his mom who noticed.

"You know Mike, did anyone ever tell you the whole 'you don't go looking for love—'"

"Love finds you? *Really?*"

"I was going to say, before I was so rudely interrupted," Lucas glared at him, "was that you don't go looking for love, because love bites you in the ass when you least expect it."

Mike snorted. "You should put that in a card. Besides, we don't need two more lovesick assholes in the Party." He grinned and nudged Dustin, who was busy sneaking glances towards the bar.

It was unusually busy today, so Suzie hadn't had much time to say hello.

"What?" Dustin startled, nearly knocking over his drink with his elbow.

"Quit staring like a creep Dustin, and just go ask her out. We're all telling you; she's going to say yes." Lucas waved his hands wildly, as if he could shoo Dustin out of the booth and over to Suzie.

"I was not staring like a creep." Dustin snarked, cheeks flushed pink right to the tips of his ears. "Right Will?"

"Well...."

"Betrayal!" Dustin exclaimed, before he got a devious look on his face that meant they were all going to hell.

"Fine! I'll ask Suzie out... If *Mike* asks someone out too."

Dread curdled in Mike's stomach.

"I don't like anyone." He muttered into his drink.

Dustin frowned.

"Dude come on. It's been ages. We're worried about you. You should at least try to date someone." Lucas prompted.

With a lurch, Mike stood up. He didn't want to talk about this anymore.

"Mike..." Will started, concern blaring in his gaze.

I need some fresh air." He instantly felt like shit for snapping at his best friends, but ignored their concerned gazes burrowing into his back as he retreated outside.

His breaths lingered as puffy white clouds as he Mike headed just off to the side of the game cafe and leaned against the wall.

Sometimes his friends pushed a little too hard over the whole "romance thing". It's not like their friend group had a lot of past dating excursions between the four of them, but none of them *knew* what it felt like for Mike after his breakup.

None of them knew what it had been like for him...

Except... it had been Lucas, Will and Dustin who'd forced him to take care of himself after the breakup. They'd forced him to eat, forced him to shower and to try to get to bed. They'd been there for Mike when it had been too tempting to look up his ex on social media and they'd been there for him to vent and cry. Maybe they didn't know exactly what his breakup felt like, but they'd been there for the most important parts.

Mike groaned and looked up at the sky. He was a jerk.

The door to the Dungeon opened and then closed, the din inside muffled once more. Steps approached, and Mike didn't need to look

up to know who it was.

"Are you okay?" Will asked, leaning against the wall beside him.

Mike sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"Yeah. I'm sorry I snapped at you guys."

"It's okay. We shouldn't have teased you so much, especially after your mom called... do you want to talk about it?" Will apologized sincerely.

Mike was quiet for a moment, trying to take a breath and formulate his thoughts into something Will could understand.

"Ever since... You know..." His throat clamped; he couldn't even say her *name*. He sucked in a deep breath before continuing, "I just haven't felt that way about anyone. That's why I haven't asked anyone out. Is something *wrong* with me?" The last part came out choked.

Will instinctively moved closer, wrapping an arm around Mike and squeezing him close.

"Mike. There is *nothing* wrong with you." Will spoke slowly and surely.

"You have to say that, you're my best friend."

Will waved off his feeble attempt at a joke.

"Someday, someone is going to come along, and it will be different. It'll be like that scene in that movie. Um... Lady and the Tramp, when the dogs are eating spaghetti and it just *clicks*. You can't force it Mike. You can't force your spaghetti moment."

Will always knew what to say to make him feel better, though in this case it was more the genuineness in the tone he spoke with than what he said. Mike knew Will was right. It was just hard lately because his mom had been on his back about his love life constantly.

Didn't she realize he thought about that stuff too?

What if he never found his spaghetti moment?

Or had it already passed by?

Mike smiled weakly, the stinging in his eyes receding a little as he looked at his friend. If Will said it would happen, it would happen.

"That's a... really weird analogy, but I think I get it. But I do have one important question." He said seriously.

Will leaned in, brows furrowed in concern. "What is it?"

"Am I the Lady, or the Tramp in this scenario?"

Will snorted. "The Tramp, obviously."

"Is that what happened for you and Alex?" Mike snickered, "you were just eating spaghetti and then bumped noses?"

Will blushed and looked up at the sky. "Maybe."

Mike grinned and wrapped an arm around his friend.

"Thanks Will. I can't wait to have my spaghetti moment someday."

Will laughed and pushed him away playfully. "You're going to hold that against me forever, aren't you?" At Mike's smirk, Will just shook his head exasperatedly. "Come on, let's head back in. It's freezing out here."

They headed back into the pub; the warmth seeped immediately back into their bones.

Dustin and Lucas looked worried as they approached the table.

"Hey dude, we're sorry. We shouldn't have been such jerks." Lucas apologized.

Mike shrugged sheepishly. "I shouldn't have snapped at you guys. I'm sorry too."

"We good?" Dustin asked, offering his fist for a fist bump.

"Yeah." Mike took the accepted the fist bump before he sat down.

Good." Dustin nodded sagely. "Now we can get back to the important question."

The other three looked at him quizzically.

"Should I, or shouldn't I ask Suzie out?"

Will and Mike groaned loudly.

Lucas's head hit the table and stayed there.

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It's been a slow morning at the coffee shop, but after a week of near frantic morning rushes, El Hopper is grateful for the quiet.

Mornings like this are her favourite, when customers linger and enjoy the cozy atmosphere she and her sister put so much thought into. Whether it's curling up in the plush armchairs by the window, or perusing the overstuffed bookshelves at the back, people are taking their time today. There are even a few new faces in the usual morning crowd, who El takes delight in subtly watching them settle into the small, comfortable coffee shop.

Newcomers are often her favourite customers for this very reason, she loves reading the first impressions of the shop from their faces.

As though sensing her title of 'favourite customer' was in danger, a blur of vibrant red hair streaked by the front window.

Moments later, Max Mayfield was leaning against the counter.

"El, thank god. I need a Mad Max, like *yesterday*."

El, who's carrying a large tray of blueberry cinnamon scones fresh from the kitchen, grinned.

"Good morning to you too, Max. How am I? I'm great, thank you for asking."

Max groaned, her typical response before she had at least one coffee in hand.

Max Mayfield worked as a detective in the 84th precinct only a half a block away from the shop. About a year ago she marched into El's life with all the avidness of a serious coffee drinker mixed with an impressive amount of sarcasm. Once you got past the '*I can and will kick your ass in twenty different ways just try me*' exterior, Max was secretly a human cinnamon roll. She was kind and fiercely loyal, with an unexpected soft side.

It hadn't taken long with Max's near daily visits to strike up a friendship, as well as for El to design a drink named after the coffee fiend herself: *The Mad Max*.

It was essentially an Americano on steroids with a pinch of cinnamon.

El noted the telltale dark circles under friend's eyes and the paleness of her skin. It wasn't an uncommon look for her.

"Rough night? Or are you auditioning for the Walking Dead?"

"Ha-ha," Max yawned widely. "I got caught up in a case file again."

"You really should stop doing that." El chastised.

Max waved her off with another yawn, practically slumping against the counter. It was only when El went to slide the fresh scones behind the display that Max perked up, her sharp blue eyes fixating on the soft, bready treats with what could only be described as yearning.

"I wish someone looked at me the way you look at my scones," El teased, "minus the drool though."

Max snorted but wiped at her mouth anyways (just in case). She was about to say something snarky when El surprised her by placing one of the scones on a plate and sliding it towards her.

"It's on me."

"I love you." Max moaned, stuffing the scone into her mouth and sighing in sheer happiness.

El giggled, "I love you too."

"You got a minute to sit?" Max asked through her mouthful, jerking her head in the direction of their favourite table by the window.

"Just give me a sec." El nodded, there weren't any customers in sight, all of them had been served and were scattered across the café.

Max went ahead and plopped down onto one of the high-backed plush chairs at the window.

A few minutes later, when El produced the steaming cup of pure, undiluted caffeine and placed it on the table in front of Max.

"Marry me?" Max sighed happily.

"I think your boyfriend might have an issue with that." El laughed, sitting down in the chair across.

Max shrugged, lost in the heavenly aroma of her special drink. "The heart wants what it wants."

They giggled, before lapsing into a comfortable silence which mostly consisted of Max devouring the last tasty morsels of her treat. It wasn't often she got to dawdle like this, so it was a treat for both of them.

"How was your date last night?" Max asked suddenly, breaking the comfortable quiet.

El couldn't help it, she made a face.

"Uh oh. That bad? Do I have to arrest anyone?"

"No." El sighed. "It was okay to begin with, but we didn't really have anything in common. When he asked me out again at the end of the night and I was honest with him, he went from nice person to *Nice*

Guy[™] real quick."

It was Max's turn to make a face. "Gross."

"Sometimes I think it's a good idea to start dating again, and then I remember that people suck."

"Do I need to kick ass?"

El shook her head. "Not today at least. I shut him down after that, the only thing bruised is his overinflated ego."

"Watch it El," Max teased, putting her plate down on the coffee table between them, "you're starting to sound like me."

"Max B.B." El smirked into her coffee.

"B.B.?"

"Before Boyfriend."

Max rolled her eyes and took a long sip of her coffee.

El watched the usual look of satisfaction flit over Max's features, her brow smoothed just for an instant and she sighed happily.

"So what are you up to this weekend?"

That was one of the traits El appreciated about her best friend. Max could read between the lines and know when to drop a subject like it was hot.

They spent a few more minutes filling each other in on the weekend before a customer arrived and Max finally had to leave for work.

El waved goodbye to Max with the promise to hang out soon before she greeted the customer. They ordered a quick cup of coffee to go, leaving El standing behind the counter in the quiet shop. She made herself busy, cleaning the few dirty dishes and sweeping the coffee grounds.

Talking about her own love life—or lack thereof always made El a

little awkward. She hadn't dated anyone in just under two years and it was only recently she even began to think about dating again.

El was guilty of being a hopeless romantic.

One of her most embarrassing secrets (or not so secret) was her love those trashy, over dramatic soap operas on TV. Some days after work she wanted nothing more than to curl up in her pajamas on the couch and relax to her favourite soaps. Sure, the drama, the backstabbing and the intricate web of lies were something she would rather not have in her life, but it was the *love* that got her. The actors portrayed romance with such passionate, breathless abandon that she couldn't help but wonder if she would *ever* have that.

In the few casual dates she'd been on, El just hadn't felt that *spark*.

She needed someone who made her heart race, someone she felt a connection with. She didn't need the overblown, crazy shows of affection on her soaps, but she needed someone who would do the little things—because it was the little things that mattered.

El sighed and put away the broom and dustpan. When she turned to wipe the front counter, a glint of metal caught her eye.

Max's keys. She must have put them down on the counter and forgot them.

El snagged the keys from the counter and slipped them safely into her pocket before glancing around the shop. The morning rush was over, so it should be fine if she ran down the block to the precinct for a minute.

She poked her head around the kitchen doorway. "Max forgot her keys; I'm going to drop them off. Can you watch the front?"

Kali didn't look up, currently wrist deep in dough. Her dark hair was swept up into a lopsided bun atop her head, it swayed as she kneaded. She made a noise that sounded like grunt of affirmation and that was all the permission El needed.

She grabbed her coat and scarf from the back and bundled up. Even though it was only a half a block, it was chilly outside and there was

nothing she hated more than catching a chill.

Once she was sufficiently wrapped in the cozy warmth of her jacket and scarf, El headed out for the 84th precinct.

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"Wheeler, *finally*."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Nice to see you too, Mayfield."

"Yeah, yeah, enough pleasantries. Can you fix this piece of crap?" Max gestured to her computer. "I was trying to file some reports and it was super slow. Then it just went *blip*!"

"Blip?" He grinned, "is that the technical term?"

"Har-har." She got up from her seat and pushed it towards him impatiently. "Work your nerd magic on this thing please."

Detective Max Mayfield had transferred to the 8-4 just over a year ago.

For someone who was only 5'3", she had the towering presence of a fire breathing dragon when she wanted to. She was a sharp, no bullshit kind of person with a keen eye. Most detectives tended to ignore the IT staff until they had an issue, but Mayfield had made a point to introduce herself to everyone.

Mike, Dustin and Lucas worked for the civilian IT department in the 84th precinct. It was a good job for the most part and although it wasn't something Mike saw himself doing forever, it was a good foot in the door. Mostly, they helped the detectives, administration and beat cops on small issues they were having on their computers.

Mike was convinced a couple of the detectives upstairs who'd been on the force since the age of the dinosaurs wouldn't leave their computers too long because they were afraid he'd update and they'd

lose Minesweeper... and they were absolutely right.

He'd get them one day when they made the mistake of leaving their desk unguarded.

The Party hadn't really gotten to know Max until she started dating Lucas.

Much to everyone's surprise, Max asked Lucas out after three months. Lucas manage to stammer a surprised, but pleased "sure" and the rest was history. Max's presence in the Party was reinforced by the fact that she was a secret nerd and, it was clear how much she cared for Lucas. Mike had never seen Lucas so happy. Those things got her an automatic "in" with the rest of the Party.

"Nerd magic, like that's even a thing." He grumbled good naturedly, accepting her seat.

He began to work, but it was hard with Max looming behind him, watching him.

"Can you go do something else other than breathe down my neck, please?" He asked jokingly, "I'll fix it as fast as I can."

Max huffed but straightened up anyways. "Fine. I'm going to run down to the file room. I'll be back in a minute."

He nodded and Max disappeared towards the stairs.

Mike turned back to the computer and began to assess the issue.

Not even *two* minutes later, Mike sensed Max's presence behind him before she could even open her mouth.

He rolled his eyes, "hold your horses, Mayfield, I'm working as fast as I can here." He turned to stick his tongue out at Max just for added effect, and then promptly almost bit it off.

"When I see her, I'll be sure to let her know." The voice is muffled, but it definitely wasn't Max.

Mike really wasn't sure *who* he was looking at.

They wore a large, fuzzy blue coat complete with a thickly knit scarf that wrapped nearly half way up their head. Their arms stuck out from their side at an angle that looked a toddler stuffed into a snowsuit in a permanent starfish pose.

"S-sorry." Mike stammered, his brain finally catching up to his body. "I thought you were someone else. Um... How cold is it outside?" The question flew past his lips before he could stop it.

Had the ice age hit in the forty-five minutes he'd been at work? Sure, it was chilly out today, but it hadn't been *that* cold.

"Not that cold, I'm just a wimp." The person reached up and slowly unwrapped the scarf from around their head.

Dark eyes, the colour of burnt umber met his.

Wow.

Mike's heart backflipped inexplicably in his chest.

Slowly the scarf unwrapped to reveal her flushed pink cheeks and her caramel hair that stuck up at all sorts of angles from the static from the scarf.

"I'm El." She startled slightly, realizing they'd both gone quiet for an odd moment. "Max forgot her keys at the shop. I just came to drop them off." She fished out a set of keys from her pocket.

"Mike. I'm in IT here." Mike hastily stood. "It's nice to meet you, El."

El held out her hand and Mike accepted it. Her hand was cold, making him jump a little at the unexpected sensation.

She smiled. "It's nice to meet you too."

"Max should be back any moment—"

No sooner did the words leave his mouth before Max reappeared.

"El!" Max greeted happily, "what are you doing here? And why are you dressed like you're about to go on an expedition to the North

Pole?"

"Brat," El grinned, "you forgot your keys. But maybe I'll just hold on to them if you're going to give me lip."

"God you sound like an old man." Max laughed and caught the keys when El playfully tossed them to her.

Max looked between Mike and El for a moment before realizing she'd neglected to introduce them.

"Right. El this is Mike. Mike, El." She never was one for wasting time.

"We already introduced ourselves." El chuckled. She glanced at the clock on the far wall. "I should probably head back to the shop. Kali will need a hand with the bagels soon."

"I'll walk you. My computer's being a piece of crap anyways, so I'll take a walk." Max offered, before turning to back to Mike. "Scoot for a sec, Wheeler."

Mike almost stumbled over the chair in his haste to move.

Max shot him a raised eyebrow, but quickly grabbed her coat from the back of the chair and put it on.

El wrapped the scarf once more around her head, ignoring the snickers from Max. "It was nice to meet you, Mike." El's voice was muffled again.

"Yeah—you too, El." He smiled, and they both stared at each other for just a fraction too long.

Max's brow furrowed ever so slightly as she looked between them.

El seemed to realize they'd lingered too long, and she quickly grabbed Max's arm and practically steered the detective out of the bullpen with a hurried "goodbye."

It was Mike's turn to raise his eyebrows in surprise.

Max Mayfield was not a touchy-feely person aside from Lucas. She

wasn't normally physically affectionate, but to see her manhandled and allow herself to be manhandled by a woman in a ridiculously fluffy coat was a sight to see.

Just who was El?

And why did his cheeks feel so warm?

Mike dazedly sat back down at Max's desk, his heart simultaneously sinking and pounding so hard he was certain all the detectives in the bullpen could hear it.

He glanced at Max's computer and jolted. He didn't want to couldn't think about whatever that odd moment between them had been because if he didn't get Max's computer fixed soon, she'd make sure he didn't live long enough to ponder what just happened.

It was probably nothing anyways. A fluke.

He got back to work, trying to ignore the small voice in his head that whispered:

You're screwed.

2. can't fight this feeling (anymore)

"A party?" Mike frowned at a pacing Dustin. "On a work night?" As soon as the sentence was out of his mouth, he cringed.

God he was old.

Dustin sighed exasperatedly. They'd been in this loop for the past five minutes and he was getting a little desperate.

"You're missing the point here Mike. I have a chance to meet *Suzie*. At. A. *Party!*" Dustin looked expectantly at Mike. Apparently, Mike's blank face didn't help because he huffed. "This could be my big chance! I could finally ask Suzie out."

"Are you going to?"

"I said I *could*."

Mike groaned.

He *really* didn't feel like going out tonight. The precinct had been insanely busy all week, leaving Mike exhausted. All he wanted to do tonight was get into bed, pull up the covers and not come out until he had to get up for work tomorrow.

"What about Lucas?"

"He's bringing Max to meet his family tonight."

Right. Shit. He forgot that was tonight.

It was so busy today he'd barely seen Lucas.

After dating for just shy of ten months, Lucas and Max decided it was time to meet his family (Max's family would be for another time, as they didn't live in Chicago, or its suburbs). It was a big milestone in the two lovebirds' relationship and both of them had been apprehensive for different reasons.

Max wanted to make a good impression on the Sinclairs. They were a

close family, unlike her own and she wanted them to like her.

Lucas, because not only was he introducing Max to his parents, but, more importantly, his little sister: *Erica*.

Erica Sinclair was a force of nature, wielding sharp intelligence and an even sharper tongue. Max and Erica would make a deadly team.

R.I.P. Lucas.

"Will?" Mike tried again hopefully.

Dustin shook his head. "He and Alex are going to an exhibit at the museum tonight. It's almost like a pre-interview interview. Please Mike?" Dustin pleaded, turning the puppy dog eyes on full blast. "You have to be my wingman."

Will was in the process of preparing an application for a new position that just opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Attending this event would be important.

That left Mike and Party rules were pretty clear: if a Party member required assistance, it was his duty to provide that assistance where needed. And in this case, it was escorting one of his best friends to a party in hopes he would get to talk to the girl he'd been mad crushing on for at least two months now.

Mike let out a long sigh of defeat. "Okay. I'll go."

"You're the best! I'm going to start getting ready." Dustin burst out happily, before scurrying to his room to begin prepping.

Mike went in the opposite direction. He headed into the kitchen to make the strongest cup of crappy instant coffee he could. If he was going to survive the night, he needed all the help he could get.

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An hour later, Dustin knocked on the weathered door of apartment 317.

Boisterous laughter and music seeped into the hallway, only slightly muffled by the door.

A handful of seconds later, the door swung open to reveal a towering, broad bear of a man. His dark, polished head gleamed in the light of the doorway. He looked down at Mike and Dustin, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Names?"

"Uh... Dustin and Mike." Dustin said unsurely, like he wasn't actually one hundred percent sure that was his name. "Suzie invited us."

At Suzie's name, the big guy lit up.

"Oh! Why didn't you say so sooner? Any friend of Suzie is a friend of mine." He grinned and stepped aside, gesturing them into the apartment.

Dustin and Mike quickly stepped into the apartment, shutting the door behind themselves.

"I'm Funshine." Funshine introduced himself, shaking each of their hands and unintentionally almost crushed them with his strength.

Mike returned the greeting and while Dustin was doing the same, he drank in the loud, excited atmosphere of the party.

The apartment was deceptively large. It was eclectic and colourful and chaotic, with art hanging almost off of every surface. Music played, but not so loud that you had to yell yourself hoarse. People were cozied up in every corner of the room, talking, dancing, or admiring the art on the walls.

Mike couldn't help but think that Will would have loved a lot of the pieces in here.

"I think I saw Suz in the kitchen. It's that doorway there." Funshine pointed them towards the kitchen.

"Thanks man." Dustin nodded, perking up once more at Suzie's name.

Making their way towards the kitchen, Mike noticed Dustin grow increasingly hesitant with each step. When he reached the doorway, Dustin stopped so abruptly Mike ran right into him.

"What is it?" Mike asked, trying to peer around Dustin.

It didn't take him long to realize why he stopped.

Suzie stood by the counter, talking to two other girls. She looked lovely tonight, dressed in a pink vintage looking shirt with faded cats on it and a plain black velvet skirt that brushed the tops of her knees. Her hair was down, a stark contrast to the simple braid she always wore at work. Maybe that's why Dustin looked so frazzled.

"I can't do it Mike." Dustin turned around, face as white as a sheet. "What if I mess it up? What if she didn't really want me to come to this party? What if—"

"Dustin. *Stop.*" Mike grabbed his shoulders and gave his friend a little shake. Thankfully, Dustin trailed off, staring at Mike with an expression that could only be described as abject terror.

Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose, realizing he was going to have to go for the tough love approach here. Nothing else was likely to sink through Dustin's thick skull right now. Not when it came to Suzie.

"Listen up. You're going to walk into that kitchen. You are going to say hello to Suzie—"

"But—"

"I said, *you are going to say hello to Suzie.*" Mike repeated, talking over Dustin sternly, "and then you're going to take it from there. Baby steps Dustin. Just remember, you got this."

Not even giving Dustin a chance to say anything, or better yet, run away, Mike grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a firm shove into the kitchen.

"There she is DUSTIN." Mike repeated, loud enough that most of the

occupants in the kitchen looked up—Suzie being one of them.

"Dustin!" Suzie exclaimed excitedly, leaving the group of now giggling girls she'd been talking to and practically sprinting over to the both of them.

"H-hi Suzie." Dustin mumbled shyly, the tips of his ears turning pink.

Suzie was undeterred, her smile so bright she could have easily outmatched the sun. "I wasn't sure if you were going to make it. I'm glad you came."

When Dustin seemed too stunned at this response to answer Mike stepped in to save him.

"He wouldn't stop talking about it, he was so excited to come. Sorry it's just us, Will and Lucas had prior commitments."

Suzie pinkened prettily, sneaking a look at Dustin as though to affirm that this was indeed true. "I'm just happy you two could make it."

"Suz! Is *this* the guy you were talking about?" A woman in a flannel shirt and beanie appeared out of nowhere, throwing her arm around Suzie and squeezing her close.

Mike didn't think he'd ever seen anyone turn as pink as Suzie did in that exact moment.

"I'm Mick guys, thanks for coming." Mick said, looking not even slightly bothered at having embarrassed Suzie.

If Suzie had been dancing around her crush the way Dustin had, it was likely her friends were at the end of their rope too. Mike could relate.

"Dustin, didn't you have that thing you wanted to ask Suzie?" Mike asked nonchalantly.

Dustin stared at him, wide eyed.

Mick caught on immediately. "Yeah, Suz I think you wanted to talk to Dustin about something now that you mention it." She winked at

Mike, not even caring that both Dustin and Suzie saw.

"We'll just leave you two alone." Mick concluded, grabbing Mike's arm and pulling him away without a backwards glance.

He was grinning as Mick pulled him into the other room, and as soon as they were out of earshot and eyeshot, Mick let go of him and rolled her eyes.

"Thank *god*. Hopefully they finally ask each other out. It was getting *painful*." Mick laughed, clapping him on the shoulder in thanks.

"Happy to help." Mike agreed.

There was a loud crash and Mick swore almost as loudly.

"Axel that better not have been you!" She shouted over the party.

There was a long delay and then:

"No, definitely wasn't me Mick—honest!"

"Honest my ass." She grumbled, shooting an apologetic look at Mike. "Sorry, I gotta go deal with that jackass of a friend over there. Feel free to help yourself to anything in the kitchen dude."

And with that, Mike was left alone.

At a party.

Where he knew no one else.

Great.

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Parties on weeknights and El weren't something that normally got along.

As someone who needed to be up at an obscene hour in the morning every day, staying up later than ten meant a full day of zombie-like behaviour on her part from lack of sleep.

It was Kali who managed to persuade her to come out, citing that "*she spent enough time at home and needed to get out and get lit*". This was coming from the woman who seemed to be able to keep any kind of insane sleep schedule and yet somehow function like a normal human being the next day.

She had been about to say no, but Kali had turned on the puppy dog eyes and the pouty lip and El folded faster than an origami crane.

Once she said hello to a few of their friends, El quickly realized coming had been a mistake. All she wanted to do tonight was curl up in bed, relax, maybe read a few chapters of her latest mystery novel before bed... and, if she were completely honest, parties still made her *uneasy*.

It was a niggling, burrowed feeling that set El on edge every time it reared its ugly head, but the feeling was still there. A part of her wondered if that feeling would always be there, no matter how many years it had been.

Which is why, the logical choice was to climb out of the window, on to the tiny fire escape and hide from the party like a mature adult.

It was chilly outside, but the soundtrack of muffled music and traffic put El right at ease.

She had been hiding outside for maybe forty-five minutes when the window slid open.

Someone cursed softly, before a leg, an arm, and then a tall figure squeezed out of the smallish window. She watched as they straightened, and then shut the window carefully before sighing in relief.

In the dim light from the window, she recognized who it was.

Dark eyes, fluffy, curly hair that was askew just so, making El's hands itch with the urge to run her fingers through it.

Nearly two weeks ago they met at the 8-4, and since then El thoughts had been *preoccupied*. At the most unexpected moment he'd seep into her thoughts. Sure, she thought he was attractive (*a gross understatement*, her subconscious whispered), but it didn't explain why the thought of him made her stomach feel like a hundred psychotic butterflies were just waiting to explode out of her like that scene from alien.

El was content to try and ignore her strange, lingering thoughts and not think about what they could mean.

And yet...

It was funny how the *very* person she'd been trying to avoid thinking about just climbed out through the window onto the tiny fire escape at a random party in Chicago.

When Mike turned, El realized a split second too late that she should have announced her presence. Instead, she was huddled up in the corner of the fire escape wrapped in a blanket like a gremlin burrito.

It was no wonder when Mike turned, he jumped about a foot off the ground.

"Shit!"

El hastily reached out to steady him, they were on a fire escape several stories up after all. She'd rather he not topple over the side of the railing if she could help it.

Her brain must have temporarily disconnected from her body, because there was *no way* she could explain the next words out of her mouth:

"Don't *fall* for me just yet."

Mike's jaw dropped, his entrancing dark eyes widened, his mouth opened and closed at least three times before El cracked and a giggle slipped past her lips.

"I'm sorry, that was *awful*." She let go of his arm and immediately found herself missing the warmth as she retreated back inside her

little blanket cocoon.

It took Mike another moment to recover, and then it finally clicked.

"El?" He asked breathlessly.

It does something to her insides, the way he says her name and it's unfair for someone she barely knows to have that kind of power over her.

"Nice to see you again." El leaned against the railing with a smile.

Mike smiled back shyly, like he's happy to hear that she thought so. "You too."

The tiny fire escape suddenly seems a lot more intimate with two people. He seemed to realize this at the same time she did.

"Oh—um, I can go back inside. I just needed some fresh air." He glanced back at the window and would have started to climb through it had she not stopped him.

"I don't mind sharing with you."

"Thanks." He said sincerely, leaning against the wall with a sigh of relief. They fell quiet for a minute, but it's not an awkward silence. As Mike settled in, El took the opportunity to study him.

High cheekbones. Cute nose. Dark, dark eyelashes contrasted starkly against fair skin. On his tall frame, Mike was just one of those enviable people who could make anything look good. Tonight, he looked handsome in a simple navy knitted sweater and a dark pair of pants.

El wasn't entirely sure why her brain seemed stuck on Mike for the last two weeks, but she wasn't about to waste the opportunity the universe handed her on a platter. She wanted to know more about him. What better time to do it?

"What really brought you out here on the tiny fire escape?" She asked, before she could lose her nerve.

Mike shrugged awkwardly. "My best friend ditched me. What about you?"

A smile tugged at her lips.

"I'm here with my sister, but I'm just not in the party mood. So technically I'm the ditcher."

"You have a sister?" He asked hesitantly, like he wasn't sure if he was overstepping.

El nodded. "An older sister, Kali. What about you?"

"Two. Nancy's the oldest and Holly's the youngest."

She ferreted this information away, in favour of more pressing questions for now.

"Why did your best friend ditch you?"

Mike hesitated. "I guess technically I ditched him. I only came tonight to help him talk to a girl." He ducked his head in embarrassment.

Cute.

The thought niggles at her brain, but El does her best to ward it off.

"Did it go well?" She shifted, drawing her blanket closer.

He nodded. "I think so. I felt like a *major* third wheel and I don't know anyone else at this party, so I came to hide out here."

"I thought you just needed some fresh air," El teased, "here I gave up precious space for a fellow ditcher."

Mike snorted, grinning, "I thought you didn't mind sharing."

"Touché."

Smiling at each other like morons, Mike's gaze finally fell to the blanket wrapped around her.

"So are you just... always cold or?"

El fake gasped, holding her hand to her heart in a move reminiscent of the far too many soap operas she'd watched.

Mike chuckled. "I mean, first the blue coat and now a blanket? It's not even that cold."

There was a shy, teasing lilt to his voice that did something funny to her insides. It was unexpected and El didn't trust her voice not to go breathy, so instead she just stuck her tongue out in response.

"Ouch." Mike laughed, holding his chest as though she'd shot him with an arrow.

The window slid open, startling them both.

"Hey, do you mind if we pop out here for a smoke?" The guy poked his head out, waving the cigarette in his hand around to emphasize his point.

"Sure." El agreed, knowing it wouldn't be fair to hog the fire escape. That, and as much as she was enjoying sitting on the fire escape talking to Mike, she knew she couldn't hide from the party forever.

El easily climbed through the window, but it took Mike a moment to awkwardly fold his long limbs enough that he could squeeze through. Once they climbed back into Mick's apartment, and El was curious if Mike would move on, but he hesitated, like he wasn't sure if he should go or stay.

She was curious about Mike, and maybe if she got to the root of her curiosity, her lingering thoughts would stop. Before she could ask Mike to get a drink, someone swooped in.

"Ellie! There you are." Axel ambushed the both of them, draping his arm around her and squeezed her close. "Your sister is busy and we're setting up beer pong in the living room. I owe *you* a rematch."

El grinned up at Axel through her lashes. "If I remember correctly, *you* lost so bad last time you broke a ping pong ball in a tantrum."

Axel scoffed and looked highly offended, running a hand through his mohawk. "I do not throw tantrums... anymore. Your sister was

pissed."

El laughed, before remembering they weren't alone.

"Sorry, Mike. This is Axel, Axel, this is my friend Mike."

Mike offered his hand out to Axel. "It's nice to meet you."

Axel glanced down at his hand and batted it away impatiently, moving in close. "I don't bother with handshakes man, hug it out."

El suppressed a giggle at the shocked look on Mike's face as Axel hugged him. Admittedly, Axel looked a lot tougher than he actually was with his leather jacket, black choker with tiny spikes and spiked cuffs, but much like Funshine he was just a big softie.

To his credit, Mike recovered fairly quickly and returned the hug.

"Now," Axel clapped a startled Mike on the shoulder, "you look like you've got a good arm span. Let's play doubles. You and Ellie over here against me and Dottie."

"Ooooh," El looked hopefully to Mike, "I'm in. How about it, Mike?"

Surprise flashed across Mike's features. It didn't take him long to decide.

"Sure. I'm game." He agreed with a shy smile.

"Atta boy." Axel threw his arms around both of them and steered the trio towards the living room.

The party had moved into full swing in the time they'd been out on the fire escape, and it took them a minute to weave through the crowd, but Axel remained undeterred until they reached the living room.

"Hey Dottie!" Axel shouted, "I got her! We're gonna play doubles!"

He deposited Mike and El across from Dottie.

El knew Dottie as one of Kali's friends. She was a slight girl, tonight

she was dressed in a pretty black lace dress paired with combat boots and smudged eye makeup. She was as kind as they got, but she had a wicked sense of humor.

Axel went to retrieve drinks for them all, leaving El to introduce Dottie and Mike.

It wasn't long before they were ready to play.

The living room was fairly crowded at that point, but that was a given being that somehow Mick managed to fit a full-sized ping pong table into her apartment. The red solo cups racked on the table were filled with water, their actual drinks on the cabinet against the wall.

"Are you *losers* ready to *lose*?" Axel taunted, throwing the ping pong ball up and down in the palm of his hand.

"We both know Dottie's the one who's going to carry the team." El fired back, earning a laugh from Dottie and a look of betrayal from Axel.

"Ready, partner?" El turned to Mike for confirmation.

He nodded seriously; his dark gaze full of amusement. "Ready."

Axel wasted no time, once they both gave the go ahead, it was on.

Coming out strong, he threw the ping pong ball with surprising accuracy, landing firmly in the cup before either El or Mike had the opportunity to try to blow the ball out.

"That's right!" Axel fist pumped as Dottie threw her ball. It landed with deadly accuracy, but El was quicker this time. As the ball circled the rim, she leaned down and quickly blew it out.

"Hah! One of out of two ain't bad." Axel jeered, "now pay up!"

El groaned and moved the solo cup off the table and fished the ball out. When she turned around, Mike was holding out her drink to her, a lopsided smile on his lips that made her heart stutter.

"That was a good save. We'll get it back." Mike praised as El tried to

ignore the warmth lingering in her fingertips where their hands brushed.

"Cheers." She knocked their cups together and held it up.

"Cheers." Mike murmured, mirroring her actions.

Once she and Mike took their penalty, the real fun began.

El went first.

Direct hit.

"Your turn." She said with a wink.

Mike nodded, his face the picture of pure concentration before he threw the ball. It landed precariously in the furthest cup, Dottie moved fast to try to blow it out, but she was a second too slow and the ping pong ball plonked into the water.

"Wow!" El cheered, "nice shot, Mike!"

"You too." Mike grinned.

"Dammit!" Axel cursed from the other side.

Over the course of the next half an hour El and Mike worked almost seamlessly together to *destroy* Axel and Dottie.

When Mike missed, El made up for it. When El missed, Mike made up for it.

They won the first game, and were wrapping up the second game (because Axel begged "best two out of three?")

During the second round Axel and Dottie made a strong comeback, matching El and Mike cup for cup.

It was down to the last cup and they had nearly the entire living room waiting with bated breath and when Mike was poised to throw the last ball. If he made it, they won. If not, with the hot streak Axel and Dottie were on, it would mean defeat.

After a tense moment, Mike threw the ball. It soared through the air in a perfect arc, before plopping firmly into the final solo cup.

"YES!" El yelled at the exact same moment Axel wailed: "NO!"

The rest of the living room burst into cheers (or jeers at Axel's loss).

In the excitement of the moment, El turned to Mike. "You were awesome!" She exclaimed, before unthinkingly launching herself to hug him.

Mike caught her and she felt his grunt of surprise more than she heard it.

He smelled like soap and something distinctly *Mike*. It was an intoxicating mix and it only took El a moment before she snapped out of it. She stepped back with a sheepish smile, trying to ignore how she immediately missed the feeling of his arms around her.

"You were awesome too. Best beer pong partner I've ever had." His cheeks were flushed. He'd pushed the sleeves of his sweater up and El couldn't help but think how handsome he looked.

"Thanks." She grinned, her cheeks flaming from more than just the compliment.

Luckily, Axel interrupted them before El could make a fool of herself further.

"GG guys, GG." Axel finally admitted with a pained sigh, "you made a deadly team."

"We'll have to have a rematch sometime." Mike smiled, this time expecting the hug that Axel gave him and taking it like a champ.

"You got it, Mikey!"

Eventually, it was time to let others play. Dottie and Axel flounced off elsewhere in the party, leaving El and Mike once more alone.

They didn't even have time to say anything, before Mike's phone made a noise that sounded suspiciously like the mushroom power up

from Mario.

"Sorry." Mike apologized, but El waved him off with a grin. He reached into his pocket and glanced at the screen. "It's my friend. I should probably get going. It's getting late." He said with a regretful look.

El peered down at her phone and blinked at the time that flashed across the screen.

"Wow, yeah. I should probably find my sister too."

She snuck a glance at Mike and was surprised to see he was doing the same thing.

"I had fun tonight, Mike." El said shyly.

"Me too, El." Mike agreed, smiling. There was a slow beat of silence and neither one of them moved.

Should I ask for his number? The question left a wake of butterflies fluttering in her stomach at the same time self-doubt niggled into her brain. Before she could decide whether to act on it, the moment was gone.

"*Dude*, there you are."

A lanky guy with the curliest hair she'd ever seen practically bounced up to Mike. He had a kind face, and a huge, beaming smile. If anyone was the picture of walking on cloud nine, it was him.

"I got her number, Mike! Her *number*."

Of course, Kali would also choose that exact moment to appear at her elbow. "Hey, I'm about ready to go. Are you good?"

"Uh..."

She watched Mike's friend drag him away, chattering all the while with the same amount of excitement as a kid on Christmas morning. He sent her a look over his shoulder that seemed to say "*help me*" but instead she stifled a laugh and waved to him.

Oh well.

The opportunity was gone, at least for *now*.

She ignored the strange look Kali gave her and looped her arm through her sister's.

At least El had muddled through her strange thoughts this evening and came to two conclusions:

(1) She had a crush on Mike, and

(2) She was so, *so* screwed.

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It was a spur of the moment decision.

Mike never went into coffee shops.

You could never tell until you stepped foot into them what kind of place they would be—the grungey cafe of the 80s or the too-sleek, too minimalist style a lot of coffee lovers seemed to flock to these days. Most of the time the menu was overwhelmingly large, and he felt the daggered stare of the baristas digging into him as he held up the line with his indecisiveness.

Today was an exception.

After nearly a week of floating on air (much to the annoyance of his best friends, but mostly because they didn't know *why*), the morning started off with the tried and true Mike Wheeler luck. He nearly slept in, and in his haste forgot his umbrella, only to have the sky open up on him and soak him through.

Cold, and miserable and in need of something hot to warm him up, Mike stopped at the coffee shop only a half a block away from the precinct. It was a place he passed daily, and yet until he'd been looking for it, it never really stood out.

The name of the coffee shop was affixed to the window. It was straight to the point—*Eighth & Eleventh*—the corner on which it sat.

He shook out his soaked shoes as best as he could in the doorway, before stepping inside.

Warmth and the heavenly scent of coffee and cinnamon washed over him, Mike felt himself relax.

The morning rush had already passed, but the shop was by no means empty. Various people were curled into the plush chairs by the window, nursing a hot drink in hand, cheeks rosy. There was an varied array of tables with benches and the far wall was the warm, rich mixed reds of exposed brick. While the decor was minimal, it had character, especially with the two, towering bookshelves that lined the back wall.

It was while he was scanning the shop that he caught sight of El.

She waited patiently for him to notice her, smiling from behind the counter of the coffee bar.

The sight of her was so unexpected that he jumped.

He hadn't seen her since unexpectedly running into her at a party a week earlier. He had such a blast at the party because of El. He wasn't sure if it was the warmth from the alcohol seeping into his skin, but he'd never thought someone was more *gorgeous* than El when she got that adorable game face on during the beer pong match. Her nose scrunched, her dark eyes danced with amusement and her grin—it had nearly given him a heart attack when she surprised him with a hug when they'd won. When she had pulled away, Mike fought hard to ignore how he immediately missed the feeling of her tucked in his arms.

El struck him as the type of person to talk to anyone, her friendship extending to all. He didn't want to read too much in to what happened at the party, between her silly pun on the fire escape, the hug... he was certain he was just overthinking everything.

But that hadn't prepared him for seeing her again so soon.

Warmth flooded his cheeks.

"El—" It came out as a bit of a croak, so he tried again, "er—what are

you doing here?"

"I work here?" She repeated with the same questioning intonation, eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Oh...right." If possible, he went redder, but El was kind enough not to let him wallow in his embarrassment for long.

"You look like you need a warm up. What can I make you?"

"Um," he cast an eye up at the menu for a moment, appreciating that it wasn't a huge script, "what do you recommend?" He tried to ignore the breathless feeling growing in his chest.

She hummed and looked him over. "I've got just the thing for you."

El turned to start preparing his drink, moving effortlessly behind the counter.

He took the small moment to study her, drinking in the soft waves of her caramel hair, tied back into a half pony today, oversized green plaid shirt and plain black jeans. How she makes such a simple outfit look so *good* was beyond him. El could probably wear a huge chicken mascot suit and she could somehow make it look good.

The machine she was working at hissed loudly, drawing him out of his thoughts just as El finished making his drink.

"Aaaaaand, done." She said with a flourish, placing a drink in a to go cup in front of him on the counter. "I'm guessing you have to get going to work, so let me know what you think later."

"I will." Mike agreed, "how much do I owe you?" He was already reaching for his wallet when El waved him off.

"It's on me."

There's a warmth spreading through Mike's chest that has nothing to do with the hot drink in his hand.

"Thank you."

There was no more time to linger, because a customer came in and Mike needed to hurry up and get his ass to work before he was late.

He barely felt the chill as he stepped outside, too lost in the warmth left lingering from his unexpected interaction with El.

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Twenty minutes later, Mike sat at his desk in a borrowed set of fresh gym clothes from Lucas.

He had no idea what the drink El made him is, but it's dark, bitter with coffee and chocolate all at once. What Mike does know, is that he's almost instantly and utterly addicted.

Whether it's to the drink, or to El, or to both, he isn't entirely sure.

"*Shit.*"

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Three days later and Mike still hadn't worked up the courage to go back to the coffee shop.

After running in to El in two unexpected ways, would it be weird if he went back to the shop so soon?

Mike was *dying* to know more about her, but somehow going back to the coffee shop to tell her how he liked her drink (even though she invited him to) seemed like too flimsy of an excuse.

His only other option?

Max.

She was his only other hope of learning more about El, but Mike sure as hell wasn't going to ask Max in front of Lucas, Dustin or Will. It would only lead to a barrage of questions Mike didn't know the answer to yet.

Dustin and Lucas especially, could be pretty merciless in their teasing, and this was so new to him that Mike just couldn't deal with that right now.

So Max it was, but he had to make it look natural otherwise she would also interrogate him about feelings Mike was still trying to wrap his head around.

His opportunity came that day at lunch, when Max poked her head into the IT office.

"Hey nerds." She greeted fondly. "Are you ready to go to lunch?" She directed the latter part of the question at Lucas.

"Shit, I wasn't watching the time. I'm just going to run to the bathroom and then I'm good." Lucas hopped up, giving Max a quick kiss on the cheek before he disappeared into the hall.

Dustin stretched his arms over his head, his shirt riding up as he groaned. "I'm going to go get something from the vending machine. BRB."

Max rolled her eyes. "Why bother saying BRB? It's the same amount of syllabus."

Dustin huffed *indignantly* and turned his nose up at her on his way by.

The other IT members were either out assisting on a ticket, or out for lunch, leaving just Mike and Max left in the office. Recognizing he wasn't going to get another opportunity soon, he decided to go for it.

"So, uh Max."

"So, uh Wheeler." Max mimicked in teasing lilt, taking a sip of the ever-present cup of coffee she seemed to live on.

"Your friend El, how long have you known each other?" He said it as

breezily as he could, trying not to give away how his heartbeat quickened even at the sound of El's name on his lips.

Max blinked at the unexpectedness of the question, only to be replaced by a curious, calculating look. "I met her shortly after I moved here at her and Kali's shop. Now she's my best friend. Why?"

He'd been expecting the latter part of the question, but somehow, he still managed to panic.

"Er, she just seemed... nice is all." Mike's cheeks were so hot it was a wonder they didn't spontaneously combust.

"Nice." Max repeated slowly, her eyes narrowing in renewed interest. She said this in a tone of voice Mike most definitely recognized. It was Max's detective voice. Specifically, her *"I'm-puzzling-some-BS-out"* voice.

He risked a glance at Max, and immediately regretted it. She wore a sort of gleefully evil look.

Uh oh.

Luckily, in that next moment, before Max could open her mouth and presumably eviscerate him for crushing on her friend, an oblivious Lucas saved the day.

"Ready to go for lunch, Mad Max?" Lucas asked, holding his hand out to his girlfriend.

Max looked like she wanted to get Mike alone in a dark room with nothing but one overhead, too bright light and a polygraph, but she swallowed whatever words she was going to say and gave in to her boyfriend.

She flushed and accepted his hand. As tough and scary as Max could be, Lucas was her Achilles' Heel.

"See you later." Lucas bid Mike goodbye just as Dustin came back into the room.

Watching them go, Mike froze when Max turned her head over her

shoulder, made eye contact with him and mouthed "*this isn't over.*" Before disappearing into the hallway.

He let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and slumped in his seat.

"Whoa," Dustin looked back and forth between Mike and the door as he reclaimed his seat, "what was that all about?"

"My doom."

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"Are you busy Friday?" Max asked the question just as El took a huge bite from her veggie burger.

Max and El were at a local vegetarian / vegan burger place just around the corner from their respective work places. While neither woman was a vegetarian or a vegan, the allure of a good chickpea patty could not be denied.

El smiled sheepishly and finished chewing before she responded. "I was just going to laze around in my pajamas and watch reruns of *All My Children*."

"So you're free."

El stuck her tongue out in response.

"You should come to Dustin's birthday."

El frowned. "Dustin? Oh! Lucas's friend, right?"

"Biggest dweeb on the planet? Yeah that's him." Max finished for her with a smirk. She could see the doubt settling in on El's face before she could even ask the question.

"I can say that because he wants to do the most dweebish thing ever

for his birthday: lasertag." Max rolled her eyes, "and he said the more the merrier, so..."

"You love laser tag." El grinned.

"Yeah, but don't tell him that."

El made a motion, crossing her heart with a secretive smile.

"I wouldn't be crashing?"

Max waved the question off. "No. Dustin said, and I quote '*invite anyone you want so I can pown them.*' Besides, it's about time you met Lucas's nerdy friends."

So far, El had only met Lucas. It wasn't because she wasn't interested in meeting Lucas's friends, but the stars just hadn't aligned yet. Between busy schedules at the shop, it just hadn't worked out yet. Max was here to give those stars a firm shove.

El giggled and then said the three words that sealed her fate: "Okay, I'm in!"

"Perfect, I'll let Dustin know." Max practically purred, which thankfully went unnoticed by El as the waitress interrupted at that exact moment.

Wheeler, that dweeb, wore his heart on his sleeve. He was an easy read and Max took great delight in making him squirm. He was just too *easy* to rile up that way.

El though... El was *much* harder to read.

It was something Max both admired and despised about her when they first met. She was so used to being able to read people like a book, it was a little unnerving to come up blank. Once she and El started talking and got onto similar interests, a wall broke between them and suddenly Max Mayfield acquired a best friend.

Still, El was much more careful about wearing her heart on her sleeve, so Max really didn't know how she felt about Wheeler. Maybe El wasn't a hundred percent sure how she felt about Wheeler either.

She knew why El was so guarded when it came to romance, but Max had a *hunch*—and when Detective Max Mayfield had a hunch, it usually ended up being right.

It was time to put it to the test.

Commence Operation Max-Maker.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Next update in two weeks! Have a great day. (◡◡*)

3. I think you're alright

Mike makes it only two days before he found himself on the front steps of *Eighth and Eleventh*.

The lull of the delicious drink and the chance that he might see El again was too strong. Luckily this time, it was a clear, crisp day and he wasn't dripping onto the floor.

As he stood in line, Mike tried to squash his disappointment that there was a distinct lack of El behind the counter. Before he knew it, it was his turn.

"What would you like?" The girl behind the cash asked.

"Umm..." Mike began awkwardly, "I don't know."

"You don't know." The girl repeated flatly, her eyebrow arching.

He thought he's seen the barista before, but he can't place her and it's making him hold up the line more.

"Last time I was here, El? She made me a drink." He explained helplessly.

The barista sighed a long-suffering sigh.

"Can you describe it?"

"It was good and chocolatey, and I think it also had coffee?" Mike offered.

"That sounds like a mocha. Four ninety-nine please."

Feeling incredibly dumb, he quickly handed over the money and made sure to leave a tip in the jar.

A few minutes later the barista slid his drink across the counter. Mike took one last look, hoping that El would miraculously pop up so he could say hello.

Unfortunately for Mike, it's not El that pops up.

The door opened behind him, followed by a friendly call:

"Kali! What's up?"

Mike froze. *Oh no.*

It's Max.

"Mad Max, back for your special?" Kali smirked and began to key in the order.

The small part of him that wasn't panicking recognized Kali's name. This was El's sister?

Where El was all soft smiles and equally soft sweaters, Kali was sharp, sharp black combat boots, a dark cascading mohawk and smudged, dark eye makeup.

Before he could think of a way out of this, Max spotted him.

"Mike?" She sounded genuinely baffled to see him, "what are you doing here?"

"Um." Mike squeaked, knowing now more than ever that if Max was suspicious before, he sure as hell wasn't going to get off the hook now.

"*Oh,*" Kali looked him over with renewed interest, "so *this* is Mike?"

He flushed under her speculative stare, wondering what that could mean. Had Max been talking about him? Or... his heart fluttered, had El?

Max smirked and leaned against the counter beside him, crossing her arms over her chest. "The one and only. Imagine that, Mike. One day after you ask about El out of the blue, and suddenly you're at her shop, when I've never seen you here before?"

Max looked to Kali for confirmation.

Kali nodded seriously, her dark gaze piercing as she seemed to assess his very soul.

"Um." Mike pulled at the collar of his shirt, trying to think of any reason—any reason at all that he could be here. The longer the silence stretched, the wider Max's smirk got.

He did the only thing he could do.

Mike fled, like a fully mature, grown adult.

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"Someone dropped by for you today."

"Oh?" El glanced up from her cutting board. She and Kali were at Kali's apartment, preparing dinner. "Who was it?"

El had been running errands for the café for a good portion of the day.

"I think it was Mark... Or was it—"

"Mike?" El asked, unable to completely stifle the excitement in her tone.

"That's it!" Kali feigned her remembering. "Speaking of Mike, you've mentioned him at least three times this last two weeks." She remarked slyly.

"Oh, uh... Did I?" El said lamely, silently willing her sister to just drop it.

Kali's eyes narrowed. "Who's Mike?"

"Just a friend." El said it way too quickly to sound believable.

Kali smirked in triumph.

"Just a friend? Are you sure about that?"

El's shoulders dropped. The jig was up.

She couldn't lie to Kali, nor did she want to. It's just... this was new. Having a real, *bonafide* crush was new to El, and she had yet to muddle through her feelings.

It had been so long since she'd felt *anything* like this.

She genuinely *liked* Mike.

He was fun to talk to and she found his presence calming. It had been a long, long time since El had felt truly relaxed at a party, but along came Mike and suddenly, that ugly feeling of unease had just *vanished*.

El realized she'd been silent for too long, when Kali's teasing gaze grew concerned.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." She said softly.

El knew she meant every word. Kali was great like that.

"No, I want to." El mustered a smile that looked much braver than she felt. "I guess, just putting it into words..."

"I get it." Kali nodded.

"I wasn't lying when I said Mike is just a friend," El began, cheeks warming, "he is just a friend. I met him at the precinct when Max forgot her keys."

Kali's brow scrunched up. "That was a while ago?"

El nodded. "And then, I ran into him again just the other night at Mick's. He came with his friend, and we crushed Axel and Dottie in beer pong. I hugged him by accident and now I'm like *ninety-nine* percent sure I have a crush on him." Her cheeks were hot. That was the first time she'd said it aloud.

Kali's eyebrows shot up. "Must have been a good hugger. Was that the

guy you waved bye to?"

"That was Mike." El confirmed.

"Mike? Who's Mike?" Hopper called, surprising El, who jerked around and conked her forehead against Kali's.

"Ow." Kali rubbed her head, frowning at El.

"Sorry." El winced, rubbing her own head to soothe it. She hadn't heard her dad come in to Kali's apartment (he had his own key, so he often just let himself in when he knew they were already there).

She turned and stared up at her father, trying to look as innocent as possible.

Hopper snorted. "You know those eyes don't work on me anymore."

El smiled, struggling to try to think of something to tell her dad.

"Mike is...a guy."

Hopper stared at El and said, "huh." He sat down at the table and took the offered cup of coffee from Kali with a nod, looking pensive. "A guy, huh?"

El nodded, trying to steal her features to be as casual as possible.

Hopper took a sip of his coffee, looking just as calculating as Kali had only minutes earlier.

"So like a guy? Or a *guy*, guy?"

"*Dad*." El whined.

"What!" Hopper held up his hands like he was surrendering, not even trying to hide the shit-eating grin on his face. "I just like to be kept in the loop is all."

It had been a busy month for Hopper so far. As Captain of the 8-4 he was already a busy man, but add meetings and ceremonies and even a conference in to the mix, their dad had been in and out of the city

for the past three and a half weeks. It's been awhile since they were all able to catch up and make dinner together.

"Mike is new." Kali offered helpfully.

Hopper's brows shot up as El shot her sister a look.

"New guy?"

"We're just friends, dad." El explained, elbowing Kali.

"Okay, okay." Hopper eased off. "I get it. Keeping it cool. Like a cucumber."

El groaned and hid her face in her hands.

"Where did you meet this Mike?"

It was fairly normal for Hopper to ask these questions. As not only a Captain of the Chicago PD, but as a single father who raised two adopted daughters alone. He was careful by nature, and El could respect that, even if it was highly embarrassing.

She sighed in defeat. "I met him at the precinct."

Hopper's brows raised so high this time they nearly disappeared into his hairline.

"Reeeeeeeally?" He mused, eyes narrowing. "Does Mike have a last name?"

El flushed, thankful she didn't have to lie about this.

"I think his last name is Wheeler, that's what Max called him. He works in IT."

"I see."

"Do you know him?" Kali asked, arms crossed over her chest.

Hopper hesitated. "Vaguely. *Anyways*, what else have I missed from my two kids?"

While Kali didn't look impressed at the very obvious and abrupt change in conversation, El was relieved and jumped for it.

They finished cooking dinner together and updated Hopper on all the goings on at the café.

"How was the conference?" El asked as they finally sat down for their meal.

"It was a conference alright, terrible coffee." Hopper grumbled. "I'm glad to be back. Thank god Powell has those idiots down on lock. Last time we were both gone, Callaghan tried to cook a turkey in the microwave."

El and Kali laughed, finally sitting down to eat together as Hopper finished tossing the salad.

She knew the topic of Mike was not over, not by a long shot. She was certain her dad and Kali would interrogate her later, but for now, dinner called.

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"Are you just about done here, Wheeler?"

Captain Hopper appeared unexpectedly at the doorway of the records room, where Mike was currently working on the computer that had unexpectedly crashed twice that week.

Captain Jim Hopper was a no-bullshit, 6'3" bear of a man. He normally had a mustache and scowl look going for him, but he had a good sense of humour and always seemed to have either a black coffee or a cigarette in hand. Hopper was fair and could be even downright nice, but the moment he detected any BS, he was *terrifying*.

Mike's posture has definitely improved since beginning work at the 8-4 and it was mostly thanks to Hopper's commanding presence and

the inexplicable feeling that he should be standing at attention the whole time Hopper might be nearby.

"Just finishing up sir." Mike nodded, watching the computer reboot carefully. He expected the captain to nod and move on like he normally did, but this time something was different.

Hopper looked like he wanted to ask a question, but was hesitating, which was *weird*. He normally didn't pull punches when it came to anything. They sat in an awkward silence, until Mike finally broke it.

"Is there er... something else I can help you with, sir?"

Hopper narrowed his eyes at Mike, before realizing what he was doing, and he seemed to snap out of it.

Mike waited, wide eyed.

Finally, Hopper seemed to decide something. "No, nothing else. Just email me the report when you're through here."

"I will, sir." Mike nodded, wondering why an inexplicable cold sweat had broken out over his body.

Hopper nodded at him and disappeared from the doorway.

For a moment, Mike sat in a confused stupor. He shook himself out of it, thinking it must be close to the end of the month reports and Hopper was probably just preoccupied.

He turned back to the computer and began to work again, when, for the second time within a short period, he was unexpectedly interrupted.

Detective Max (*call me Maxine and I will end you*) Mayfield announced herself by kicking the door with the side of her boot.

Mike jumped at the loud *thunk*.

It wasn't too often she sought him out specifically, but this interaction was inevitable ever since he fumbled the question of El. First when he'd asked about her, and second, when he literally ran

away from the coffee shop. Yeah, that was pretty damning, but he just had to play it cool.

He could do this.

"Oh, hi Mayfield." Mike greeted, not quite sure what to think of the carefully impassive look on her face. He took a sip of water from his water bottle.

Max didn't waste any time.

"Hey Wheeler. So, you've got the hots for Hopper."

Mike choked.

Water sprayed all down his front and across the desk. "*What?*" He croaked. "Gross Max, I don't have the hots for the captain. What the hell?"

Max stared at Mike for a long, hard moment and then, most unnervingly, a smirk stretched across her lips, like she'd just realized some great joke that he definitely wasn't in on.

"My bad. Unrelated, are you going to be at Dustin's birthday tomorrow?" Max asked innocently.

Mike felt like he was in the Twilight Zone at the sudden change in topic, but he somehow managed to answer anyways. "Yeah?"

"Good. Later, Wheeler." Max turned to go, but Mike squawked in protest.

"Wait! Why did you think that I had the hots for the captain?" He asked indignantly.

Max just waved at him over her shoulder, that infuriating smirk still in place. "You'll find out soon enough."

A shudder crawled up his spine as Mike stared after her, covered in water and entirely too confused.

What the *hell* just happened?

What had he done to make Max think that he had the hots for Captain Hopper of all people?

Worse yet, did the *Captain* think this?

Mike shuddered again. He'd have to take extra care to be strictly professional for the next long, long, long while and hopefully bleach this incident from his brain somehow. For now, he got back to work, but was unable to shake the sense of foreboding lingering over his head.

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Friday came so quickly Mike felt as though he'd barely blinked and the week was over. It had been so busy it turned into a blur, and the next thing he knew they were piling into Lucas's car to head to laser tag to start Dustin's birthday celebrations.

"Ready to pown some noobs?" Dustin asked excitedly.

"Definitely." Mike grinned as he buckled up his seatbelt.

Truthfully, he was looking forward to playing laser tag. It might be super geeky to still play but it was always a good steam burner shooting preteens that took the game way too seriously with cheesy laser guns.

"I thought Max was coming tonight?" Will asked when they were all buckled in.

"She said she'll meet us there." Lucas said with a shrug.

Strange.

Mike didn't have time to dwell on it, as they quickly began catching up with Will on the way.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of *Lasertastic Laser Tag*.

"Beauty." Dustin scrambled out of the car and admired the giant neon sign.

The interior was a blast from the past, bright neon painted signs everywhere, overpriced arcade games and the lingering stench of cheap nachos.

Mike drank it all in as they queued at the till to sign the waiver and pay for their rounds of laser tag, splitting the cost of Dustin's between them.

The only stipulation to whatever the party did for their birthday celebration was that the birthday boy had to wear a badge with an obnoxious blue ribbon attached that read: "BIRTHDAY BOY".

"As the birthday boy," Dustin made the announcement grandly, pointing to his badge, "I demand that my loyal subjects maintain a chosen theme, as dictated by me, for the code names."

Will, Mike and Lucas exchanged looks in growing apprehension.

"I deem, the theme for your codenames will be *Disney Princesses*."

"What!"

"Dude!"

"I call dibs on Mulan!"

Three of the four party members turned to Will in surprise.

He shrugged. "What? She's cool! She saved China."

There was some grumbling from both Lucas and Mike as they chose their princess code names—Lucas grudgingly went with "Rapunzel", while Mike chose "Jasmin". Dustin, meanwhile, stuck with "Birthday Boi".

Just as they finished paying, someone familiar greeted: "Hey nerds."

Mike turned around with a grin.

"Nice to see you too, Ma—"

The words died on his lips.

El stood beside Max and waved shyly to the group. Her eyes went wide as she saw him, clearly just as surprised to see him here as he was to see her.

Max ignored his social gaff and carried on. "Nerds, this is El, El this is the nerds."

"Hey!" Dustin squawked in indignation.

El giggled. "You must be Dustin. It's nice to finally meet you. Happy Birthday." She gave a warm smile to Dustin before turning her attention to Lucas. "It's nice to see you again, Lucas."

Lucas returned the sentiment while Will introduced himself next, before looking to Mike to do the same. When he awkwardly hovered there, unsure of what to do, Will covered for him.

"Um... and this is Mike." Will offered, looking strangely at Mike.

El smiled at him and it did something to his insides. "Yeah, we've met."

"You have?" Dustin asked, surprised.

She nodded, brushing her hair behind her ears. "Three times now?" She laughed breathlessly, "I didn't realize you were part of Lucas's friend group. Max has been wanting me to meet everyone for a while now."

Mike knew he was in trouble the moment Will, Dustin and Lucas's heads swiveled around as one, narrowing in on him.

Shit.

"We met at the 8-4, when Max forgot her keys. After that we kind of just bumped into each other by accident." El elaborated.

Dustin's narrowed eyes widened in recognition. "You! You were with

him at the party the other week?"

Mike could feel his cheeks heating up under Will's scrutinizing gaze.

Luckily El didn't seem particularly bothered that Mike hadn't told any of his friends about her. Even Max seemed surprised when El mentioned they'd run into each other three times now.

"That was me." She confirmed.

Dustin, Lucas, Will and even Max stared at Mike with varying levels of speculation on their features that he most certainly *did not* like.

El, who seemed oblivious to the heat Mike was now under, looked behind them to the counter.

"Oh! We get to choose our code names, that's awesome." She grabbed Max and headed towards the counter.

"The theme is Disney Princesses!" Dustin called after the two girls, not even taking his eyes off of Mike.

"So Mike," Will began as soon as the girls were out of ear shot, "El is cute."

Point five of a second is how long it took Mike to go beet red.

Lucas and Dustin crowded around excitedly, immediately firing off question after question.

"Do you like her?"

"Are you going to ask her out?"

"Were you hiding this from us *Michael*?"

With each passing question Mike grew increasingly miserable. This was the *exact* thing he'd been hoping to avoid. Having just come to terms with it himself, Mike was wholly unprepared to field their questions. Panic and bile were rising in his throat, but he clamped it down.

"I don't know. We barely know each other and we're just friends. Can we drop it?" He pleaded when Dustin and Lucas took a breath between questions.

"Drop what?"

Mike slowly turned around like one of those horror movie scenes, mortified to see Max and El standing right behind him.

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For an *awkward* moment no one said anything.

El peered curiously between Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will with a sinking feeling in her stomach. She suspected they were talking about her, maybe she'd overstepped by intruding on Dustin's birthday.

Her heart dropped. Maybe he wanted it to be just friends and was too polite to say so.

She turned to Max to say that maybe she should go but was interrupted.

"Mike here was just telling us that he was going to drop it... as in, uh, drop it like it's hot on the dance floor sometime soon!" Dustin blurted out.

El blinked in surprise and looked once more at a slowly reddening Mike.

"You like to dance?"

Before Mike could answer for himself, Lucas jumped in. "Some might call him, the *King of the Hustle*."

In response, Mike just covered his face with his hands and looked like he wanted nothing more in that moment for lightning to strike him down.

"You guys are being weird, so I'm just going to ignore it." Max rolled her eyes, clearly out of patience for whatever this was.

Desperate for a change of topic, Dustin burst out,

"What codenames did you choose?"

"We chose each other's." Max glared at El when she snickered. "El chose Ariel for me."

Even Mike cracked a smile at that. Of course, one of the only red-haired princesses would be a fitting codename for Max.

"So in retaliation I chose Cinder-*ELL*-a." Max shot back.

"Good one, Max." El rolled her eyes.

"What are we waiting for then?" Lucas asked, putting his arm around Max. "Let's get started."

The group of six headed towards the "debriefing room". There was a small lineup. Not even thirty seconds pass before a teenager wearing a bright sweater with *Marshal* in bold letters, opened the room and ushered them inside.

"Pay attention to the video, then we'll get started." The teenager said in a bored tone, clearly having done this routine too many times to count.

El somehow found herself standing next to Mike in the darkness of the room. Just as the video began, her hand brushed Mike's by accident, causing both of them to jolt.

"Sorry." El whispered, heart racing.

Mike smiled, and said, almost unthinkingly, "I don't mind."

El's face exploded into a blush at the same moment Mike seemed to process what he just said.

There's no recovering however, as the video begins to blare, and they're forced to pay attention. El's heart hammered in her chest, and

even as she did her best to pay attention to the video, it's a losing battle with Mike standing so close beside her, his words ringing in her ears.

She's almost grateful when the video finished, and they were ushered into a different room from a secret side door. The next room was dark, the only light coming from the flickering vests hanging up on hooks along the wall.

"Choose a vest, put your magnetic coin on the top to activate it and wait for further instructions." Called the Marshal, leaning against the far wall of the room.

There was some shuffling as they figured out how to put their vest on over their heads and tightened the straps. There were only about fifteen or so people this round.

"Alright. Do we want teams, or free for all?"

There was a scattered call of "teams!" and suddenly they were divided into two random teams of approximately eight people each.

El glanced down at her now brightly lit green vest and immediately glanced over to see what team everyone else was on.

Max grinned back at her, also wearing a green vest.

Mike, Dustin, Will and Lucas had all been divided to the red team.

"Ooooo," Dustin crowed, glancing back and forth between Max and El. "Looks like you guys are going down."

"In your dreams Henderson," Max taunted right back. "we're going to wipe the floor with you."

Dustin fake gasped in hurt, looking to El like she wouldn't be nearly as mean.

El was glad to disappoint. "Just remember, it's your birthday and you can cry if you want to."

Dustin choked.

Lucas, Will and Mike laughed at the unexpected quip as Dustin floundered.

"Game starts in ten seconds." The Marshal called, interrupting their pre-game trash talking.

El headed to the green team side with Max, exchanging a few hellos with the other players. Before long, the Marshal opened the door, and the countdown began.

Max motioned for El to follow her, they headed into the unfamiliar laser tag landscape. In the distance, she could hear the other players scurrying into the course. It was a blur of bright neon painted walls and obstacles under blacklight. The fog machine must have been going full blast, making the room eerie with the lingering fog that kicked up at their feet as they led El up to the second floor of the course, and they huddled up in a corner that overlooked a key walkway.

"We'll keep moving. Just follow my lead." Max grinned.

El returned the grin, wondering at which point the boys would remember Max was a detective. A detective who *routinely* practiced at the shooting range and had a really good eye.

"Lead us to victory, Mad Max." El teased.

The countdown reached 3, 2, 1...and the game was on.

Immediately the sound of lasers *pew, pew, pewing* filled the air. El made sure to keep down, making herself a smaller, less obvious target as she peaked over the side of the wall.

Max looked like she'd been born for laser tag. Her laser gun made a noise of celebration when she shot off a few rounds and she grinned, looking down to see who she'd got.

"Rapunzel. *Nice.*"

El followed suit, aiming for a cluster of team red huddled in the far corner of the arena.

Her laser gun made the victory noise, and she eagerly looked down to

see who she got.

Cinderella tagged Jasmin stared up at her from the small screen.

Round one went fast, El barely saw glimpses of the boys, only seeing their names repeatedly flash up on her screen as she shot them, and from time to time she could hear their frustrated groans.

Finally, round one was over only fifteen minutes later.

As everyone filed out of the maze-like course, El accidentally bumped shoulders with someone.

"Sorry," they apologized at the same time, and then realized who it was.

"Oh, it's you." Mike smiled; cheeks flushed from the exertion of the game. "I'm pretty sure you and Max *slaughtered* us."

El smirked. "We warned you."

Mike laughed. "I guess you did."

They reached the room with all the vests, and El shrugged hers up and over her head to return it to the rack.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mike's shirt ride up just a bit, revealing the smooth sliver of abdomen. Warmth curled pleasantly in her stomach, and once she realized she was full out ogling him, she quickly looked away, face hot.

"Max you are a stone-cold laser tag murderer." Dustin groaned loudly, tailing Max with a defeated slump to his shoulders.

"You made it too easy, Henderson." Max jeered, hanging up her vest. "Now let's go see the score."

El and Mike followed the others as they headed towards the exit, to see the large real time scoreboard just outside the vest room.

It became clear who was on the green team versus who was on the red team very quickly as the cheers or groans broke out.

"How?" Lucas gaped at the scoreboard and then at Max.

Green team had clearly decimated the red team, but Max was in a league all on her own, in first place overall (a whopping 13,467 points) and the best hit to shot ratio to boot.

On El's left, Will sighed. "At least I wasn't dead last this time." His code name, Mulan, sat three spaces above last place. He scanned the green team's roster and his eyebrows raised. "Wow El, you did really good too."

Sure enough, right beneath Ariel, sat Cinderella with a grand total of 8,603 points.

The Marshal opened up the door, calling out for the next match to start in two minutes. They filtered back into line, El somehow once more ending up beside Mike as they funneled into the room.

"Nice shooting, Tex." Mike said.

El pretended to tip her hat. "Don't think I'll go easy on you this round."

Mike chuckled, the sound sending a flush of butterflies spiraling under her skin. "I just hope I'm on your team."

By good or bad luck depending on who was looking at it, El and Max ended up separated once more.

"Yes!" Dustin cheered when this time he saw his vest turn blue, and El and Max's turn red. "We get a rematch! Get ready to get wrecked!" The grin on his face fell when he noticed that Will's vest was also blue, whereas Dustin's, Mike's and Lucas's vests were red. "No!" he groaned, "you traitor, Will!"

Will rolled his eyes, shooting an exasperated smile at El and Max. "I guess I get to be on the winning team for once."

Dustin gaped at Will, just as the round began once more.

While round one was a good, clean game, it became very clear very early that Dustin, Lucas and Mike were out for blood.

El and Max moved as a cohesive unit, Will following behind them and letting them do their thing.

El's vest made the unhappy sound, powering down. She glanced around wildly, looking for the source and spotting how she'd left herself open.

Jasmin tagged Cinderella.

She moved, tugging Max along to move for coverage and motioning for Will to sink further into an alcove. They waited for thirty seconds before Max moved them further into the had just paused in a hidden, dark corner just off the main path when Max held up her fist, indicating silently for Will and El to stop behind her.

Dutifully, El and Will followed her directions and held their breath. Sure enough, they could hear voices coming around the corner.

"Aww shit. Max got me again." Dustin whined, frowning down at his gun that flashed on the screen.

El, struck by sudden inspiration, stepped out from around Max and the corner and shot three times. Her laser gun trilled thrice over, and she would forever remember the identical looks of shock on Dustin, Lucas and Mike's faces.

"Happy Birthday." El grinned.

Max and Will cackled, Max quickly pulling on El as they fled. The other three yelled after them in outrage, what just happened finally kicking in to their shell-shocked brains, their useless (still deactivated) laser guns flailing wildly.

From there, the antics got pretty out of hand, and El couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard.

At one point, Dustin appeared suddenly and shouted: "suppressing fire!" While holding a small, confused child in front of his vest so they couldn't return the shots.

It was Max who broke the stunned silence as Dustin released the rando kid, handed them five bucks and they scurried off.

"Dustin did you just *use that child as a human shield?*" Max asked, both in stunned disbelief and kicking herself for not thinking of that sooner.

"...Maybe."

And from there is only got worse.

Despite not being allowed to climb the structures, that didn't stop Max from doing a barrel roll off one of the stacked cubes in the middle to get the jump on Lucas and Mike.

Lucas retaliated by having Mike and Dustin dangle him over the edge of one of the taller structures just to get the drop on Max, El and Will.

Will, for his part, was normally the voice of reason to crazy shenanigans, as it was, Will's voice of reason was quieted by his thirst for revenge. It was Will who hid in some fake foliage, draping a portion of it over his back and camouflaging himself in order to sit as still as possible and sniper Dustin, Lucas and Mike repeatedly.

By the end of the third match El was breathless and her sides ached from laughter.

When the Marshal appeared, annoyed, the group quickly hung up their vests for the night and practically ran out the door, knowing they damn well broke almost every rule the last round.

They piled in to Lucas's car, breathless with laughter and head for the next stop in the celebrations.

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The Dungeon (or "nerd nirvana" as Max so lovingly dubbed it), was boisterous and busy by the time they arrived shortly after ten.

Mike glanced at El out of the corner of his eyes, a little nervous that she would think their usual hangout spot was too nerdy, but he was pleasantly surprised to see genuine wonder on her features.

Her eyes were wide as she drank in the almost overwhelmingly geeky decor of the bar. Almost every inch of available wall and ceiling space was taken up by Star Wars, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Mario, any other fandom paraphernalia you could imagine. There was even the giant shark (Bruce) from Nemo hanging from the ceiling with a bright purple clam shell bra hanging from its teeth.

It was overwhelming and loud and somehow perfect all at once, the booths were dark and plush, the visible wall space panelled a warm oak colour, it was truly the Party's home away from home.

"So what do you think, El?" Dustin asked proudly, puffing out his chest proudly, as though he were a king showing off his kingdom.

"It's awesome." She grinned, still trying to take it all in. She froze, her eyes going even wider.

Mike, a little worried, followed her gaze to an air hockey table in the back.

"Air hockey?" She breathed excitedly, "I *love* air hockey."

"Shit." Max mumbled, "I forgot they had one of those."

The boys turned to Max questioningly to elaborate.

"If you thought the laser tag was bad, just wait. I once saw her make a grown man cry."

The four boys paled, heads whipping back to El with identical, deer in the headlight expressions.

El just smiled sweetly, her eyes glimmering with something a little predatory.

"Hey guys, Suzie saved your booth near the back, so go ahead and have a seat." The host said, waving them through.

"Thanks." Will said happily, before leading their group towards the back of the café.

The booth open was normally only meant for four people, but they'd

make it work. Max slid in first, followed by Lucas and Dustin on one side, leaving El to be sandwiched by Will and Mike on the other. There wasn't much choice but to squish together in the booth, but no one seemed to mind the proximity.

They'd just finished settling in to their booth when Suzie appeared.

"Hey guys!" She greeted with bright eyes even brighter smile. "Hi Dustin," she added somewhat shyly as she handed out menus.

Dustin's cheeks pinkened. "Hi Suzie."

Dustin had invited Suzie out to his birthday, but she covered a shift for a co-worker who had a family emergency and hadn't been able to come. Dustin had been disappointed but had perked up when Suzie said she'd save them a booth in her section for after laser tag.

"Do you want your..." Suzie trailed off when she spotted the new face among the group. "Oh! I'm sorry, I haven't seen you here before. I'm Suzie."

"I'm El. It's nice to meet you, Suzie." El returned the greeting happily.

The two girls exchanged a smile before getting back to the topic at hand.

"So what can I get you?" Suzie asked, winking at Dustin in particular.

Dustin flushed and managed to stutter out his order. Once she had all their drink orders, Suzie hustled away and El turned to Dustin.

"She's so nice! Are you two dating?"

Dustin turned so red it was astonishing his head didn't pop off.

"No!" He practically shouted. He then realized he wasn't talking in a normal human volume and amended lamely, "I mean... no."

"Oh," El looked like she wished she'd bit her tongue off, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable." She apologized.

"It's okay El," Lucas rolled his eyes, "he *wishes* Suzie was his girlfriend."

He's just too chicken to make a move."

Dustin shot Lucas a withering look. "I am *not* chicken. I got her number, Lucas, remember?"

"For Pete's sake Henderson, she likes you. You'd have to be blind not to see it. Ask the poor girl out or I will." Max complained.

Wide eyed, El froze as her best friend began what could only be described as "verbal sparring" with Dustin, Lucas and Will. Dustin, maintaining that he "wasn't a chicken", Max and Lucas saying, "yes you are", and Will, scolding Max and Lucas and trying to get them to lay off Dustin.

Mike could see El's distress and leaned over, trying to ignore how his stomach swooped. "It's okay, they do this every time. They'll forget about it any minute now." He whispered conspiratorially.

El nodded, the movement making her hair tickle Mike's face before he moved away. Sure enough, the bickering lapsed into silence when Suzie reappeared, a full tray of drinks in hand.

"Here we are," Suzie expertly dispersed the various beer and liquor to their respective owners, before depositing the only remaining drink left on the tray in front of Dustin.

"Happy Birthday, Dustin." she blushed prettily, "this one's on me."

It was the bar's bright, fruity, hot pink '*Birthday Bonanza Cocktail*', complete with a sparkler and a piece of pineapple.

Dustin was so shocked; he didn't say a word. Suzie's face fell and for the rest of the table, it was *painful* to watch.

"It's okay if you don't want it, I'll get you something else..." Suzie reached for the drink at the exact moment Max dug her elbow sharply into Dustin's ribs.

"No! I want it!" He yelped, lunging for the bright pink cocktail. He scooped it up and hastily took a drink. "Thanks Suzie, you're the best." Dustin smiled, cheeks flaming so bright they nearly matched the cocktail.

"Y-you're welcome." She blushed prettily, before seemingly remembering that they had an audience. "Just let me know if you guys need anything else."

With that, she made her quick escape, face completely red, an unmistakable spring in her step.

Once Suzie was out of earshot, all five grinning friends turned to face Dustin as he took a long sip of his drink.

"Shut up." Dustin mumbled, beet red.

"Aww! I think it's adorable." Max reached over and pinched his cheek, "but I'm going to go top my score in Dig Dug. Catch ya later nerds." With that, the detective was gone in a flash of red, beelining for the arcade game.

"I'm going to go heckle her." Lucas said lovingly, staring after his girlfriend with hearts in his eyes. He too slipped out of the booth and beelined for the games.

"Want to try to beat our score in Pac Man?" Will asked Dustin.

Dustin, who'd been staring after Suzie with a dazed look on his face, snapped back into it. "Sure." He agreed, taking his hot pink Birthday Bonanza Cocktail with him.

The left only Mike and El sitting alone at the table, something Mike was *very* overly aware of.

"This place is amazing." El said, drinking in the sights and wonders of the café while she sipped her drink.

"Yeah, it's our favourite place." Mike agreed, acutely aware of how El's leg pressed into his. Neither of them had slid over, despite the booth being totally empty now aside from the two of them.

"Do you want to play a game?" He asked hopefully, trying to think of anything to distract from the warmth seeping into his leg.

El perked up, her dark eyes full of excitement. "Air hockey?"

Mike's heart stuttered at the adorable, imploring expression on her features. "I'm not sure, I don't know if I feel like crying tonight." He mused, grinning slyly.

El played dirty and looked up at him with what could only unmistakably be puppy dog eyes. He knew he was doomed.

"That's just cruel, you can't give me the puppy dog eyes like that." Mike groaned, but he couldn't stop smiling.

"Did it work?" El asked, fluttering her eyelashes just so.

"Maybe." Mike knew when to admit defeat. Besides, he was truly curious how good was El at table hockey? Max had to be joking around... right?

Guess he was about to find out, because El was already excitedly sliding out of the booth. She headed straight for the air hockey table with all the excitement of a kid about to dive into a ball pit.

It was a long time since Mike had played air hockey. He often he opted for the classic arcade games, or the board games. While he wasn't the fastest, most optimal player, Mike Wheeler could hold his own in most games.

"Ready?" El asked sweetly, making sure Mike was ready before she deposited the coin into the slot.

Round one was pretty polite, El won, but not by a huge margin and Mike gamely kept up.

By the end of round two, politeness was mostly forgotten as Mike and El had devolved into petty trash talk.

"*Damn* your pterodactyl arms!" El swore when he scored yet another point.

Mike choked on his drink.

By round three, they were both sweating and flushed in exertion. Mike won the second game, surprising El and tying up the score. It was an event that had Max, Lucas, Will and Dustin standing around

the air hockey table, cheering or jeering depending on whose side they were on.

Max was still in awe that Mike had managed to win even one round. El had absolutely wiped the floor with any and all opponents before, so this was uncalled for.

"Can you handle the pressure, El?" Mike taunted, grabbing the striker and holding it up in a 'come at me bro' motion. While he may have been shy in the first round to "throw down" as Dustin so helpfully put it, the shyness evaporated the moment he realized that El certainly wasn't afraid to dish it out.

El's eyes narrowed, she attempted to sneer, but it was clear she was fighting off a smile the whole time. "I eat pressure for breakfast."

Dustin and Max "ooooo'h'd" helpfully, adding affect to El's burn much to Mike's chagrin.

If El got one more point, she won this game and overall, the war. He had to make it count.

Making sure she was poised and ready, Mike placed the puck and fired hard. It pinged off the right side of the table and shot towards El's goal, but she was fast. She blocked it effortlessly, firing it back with just as much aggression.

Mike moved quick to deflect it, unable to do much more than just knock the puck off course. It sailed back to El's waiting striker. Quicker than he could blink, El fired the puck back. As though his arm had a mind of its own, it moved, blocking the puck.

The puck bounced back and as Mike went to hit it towards El, he overcorrected and accidentally hit the puck—*straight into his goal*.

There was a stunned moment of silence as everyone processed the fact that Mike just scored on his own goddamn self.

"WOO!" Dustin (the traitor) cheered loudly, he and Max rushed El with congratulations.

Mike groaned in defeat.

"Better luck next time, Mike." Will said, patting his shoulder.

They headed back towards the table after, Mike and El much sweatier now after the intense few rounds of air hockey.

"That was a good game." El praised, looking up at him with her warm gaze. "You almost had me there...until you scored on yourself."

Mike was unable to stop the grin from spreading across his lips. "Next time me and my pterodactyl arms will have to do better."

She blushed and he laughed, demonstrating there was no hard feelings for the in-game trash talk.

They climbed back into the booth and slid over, oblivious to the other's loud, excited chatter.

Once they'd settled in, El leaned over and whispered, "I like your pterodactyl arms." And then *holy shit*, she was touching his arm. Her fingers curled against his bicep gently, the heat from her hand making his head spin at the simple motion. And the way she looked up at him, through her lashes, her rich brown eyes dark with something that sent a warm heat curling in his abdomen.

El was bewitching, and he was bewitched.

"WHAT!" Dustin's loud blurt ripped both of them forcefully out of the moment.

"What happened?" Max asked, her brow furrowed as she looked between the two boys.

"Will happened! Why didn't you tell us?"

Will slowly turned red as all the stares at the table turned towards him. "It's not a big deal."

Dustin guffawed, and looked at everyone like can you believe this guy?

Max clearly ran out of patience and snapped, "tell us what?"

"Will got his job!"

There was a moment of silence as it sank in for everyone.

"Congrats Will!"

"You deserve it man," Lucas clapped him on the back.

Dustin knocked shoulders with Will playfully, "are you telling me I'm sitting next to the Executive Assistant Exhibit Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art?"

Will snorted into his drink, face completely red to the tips of his ears and the back of his neck.

"That's amazing Will, you deserve it." Mike praised excitedly, earning a mumbled thank you from him.

"Why didn't you want to tell us, Byers?" Max frowned.

Will shrugged, embarrassed at all the praise and attention. "I was going to tell you, just didn't want to take away Dustin's birthday thunder."

In response, Dustin picked up his drink and held it up high. "To Will!"

Everyone followed suit, except Will, who picked up his drink and said, "and to Dustin! Happy birthday!"

They cheered, happily toasting Will and Dustin.

"Henderson!" A new voice shouted happily, catching everyone off guard at the table.

Dustin glanced up in confusion, but then his face lit up just as quickly. He was up and out of the booth in a flash.

"Steve! You son of a bitch, you said you couldn't make it."

Dustin rushed towards a tall guy, and immediately they fell into their complicated handshake with a mimed lightsaber battle that ended up with Steve pretending to spill his guts before they embraced.

"I thought so too! But here I am." Steve grinned proudly when they finished, ruffling Dustin's hair affectionately. "I couldn't miss my little bro's birthday!"

He followed this up by promptly putting the birthday boy into a headlock.

"Get off." Dustin squirmed helplessly; his face squished.

A tall, bored looking girl appeared next to Steve and pinched his elbow, eliciting a yelp from Steve and a kneejerk reaction to flail, which released Dustin.

"Robin, *thank god*." Dustin exclaimed, hugging the tall girl too. She hugged him back with just as much enthusiasm, while ignoring Steve, who grumbled about being manhandled.

"Happy birthday." Robin smiled, holding out a brightly coloured envelope.

Dustin accepted it with a pleased grin, before leading the two newcomers over to the booth.

"Robin, Steve, this is El."

"It's nice to meet you." El said happily, Robin and Steve returning the sentiment.

They managed to rustle up a few extra chairs so they could fit Robin and Steve at the end of the booth.

"We're not just celebrating my birthday anymore." Dustin explained excitedly to Steve and Robin, grabbing Will around the shoulders and giving him an excited shake, "Will got the job!"

"Awesome!"

"Congratulations Will, I knew you'd get it!" Robin praised.

Steve was one of Dustin's closest friends. He was more like a brother than anything, so if Dustin knew about something, Steve knew too. Cue Steve moving in with Robin, a sassy, girl who they became fast,

fast friends. Numerous times Dustin referred to Robin as Steve's BFF, which meant if Steve knew, Robin also knew. He'd been keeping both Robin and Steve apprised of Will's job application process.

Well wishes went all around, causing Will to go bright red under all the praise once more.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur.

At one point, Alex, Will's boyfriend, arrived, fresh off of work. He greeted a now permanently red-faced Will with a sweet kiss before also finding a chair to drag over to the table. Will promptly introduced Alex and El, who hit it off well and were currently elbows deep in some kind of conversation about a cult classic movie they'd both seen.

Mike, for his part, did his best not to stare at her.

It was hard, watching as she talked about something she was passionately regaling as "the best worst movie she'd ever seen", her eyes alight with excitement and a broad smile stretched across her lips. She kept looking back to Mike when she talked, as if trying to draw him in to the conversation with her gaze alone, she was magnetic. Her hand brushed his knee and she didn't seem to notice, but the warmth of her fingertips seared into his skin.

He was so busy staring at El like some lovesick fool, it took him a *while* to realize he had an audience.

Steve and Robin were staring right at him, huge grins on their faces. Luckily no one else seemed to notice, too engrossed now in the conversation El and Alex had expanded.

Dustin was currently arguing that the best-worst movie he'd ever seen was *Pirahnaconda*, so no one else noticed the silent conversation going on between Mike, Steve and Robin.

He managed to avoid their gaze for the rest of the night, pointedly not looking in their direction despite feeling their gaze periodically.

He felt them watching when El finally managed to drag him in to the conversation about horrible movies.

He felt them watching when El leaned over to whisper that she needed a rematch at air hockey sometime.

He felt them watching when El got up to go, it being nearly 1:30AM by the time the party was winding down.

Max and Lucas got up to give her a hug, followed by Dustin giving her a hug and thanking her for coming—and at that point everyone got in on the hugs.

Finally, it was Mike's turn.

She seemed oblivious to the audience behind them, which Mike was grateful for.

"Bye Mike," El said shyly, hugging him.

He immediately caught her scent, sweet, with a lingering trace of coffee and something distinctly El.

"Bye El." He said. Whether they meant to or not, they lingered a little too long in their hug, parting almost reluctantly.

When would he see her next?

Before he could think about the answer to that question, El had to go. Alex and Will were ready to take off too, volunteering to walk El to the subway station. She waved one last time, her gaze lingering on him almost wistfully.

He slumped in disappointment once she was out of sight, cursing himself for being too scared to go ask for her number—ask for her email—hell, he'd even send her snail mail if it meant talking to her again.

He headed to use the washroom and splash some water on his face to clear his head. When he left the bathroom, he found Robin and Steve waiting in the hallway for him.

Immediately Mike was on edge.

"Hey Wheeler," Steve greeted casually, though his innocent tone of voice didn't fool Mike.

Steve got to the point quick, a refreshing change from how he usually ran his mouth. "What's the deal with you and El? Are you two dating?"

Mike tried to ignore the flush creeping up his neck. "No. We're just friends."

Robin and Steve exchanged a knowing look.

"She likes you, you like her... what's the hold up, Wheeler?" Steve drawled.

His heart thumped traitorously at Steve's declaration.

She likes you.

He squashed down the hope welling dangerously in his chest and glared, wondering if he glared hard enough if he could set Steve's precious hair on fire. "There's no hold up."

Steve stared at him, unimpressed.

"The dingus is right."

Mike nearly jumped out of his skin at Robin's unexpected chime in.

Jesus, how many people knew about his crush on El?

If Dustin knew (which Mike was pretty sure he only figured it out tonight) it meant Steve knew, which definitely meant Robin knew because Steve was incapable of keeping anything from her.

"Chill, no one told us. It's just so obvious it's *painful*." Steve smirked. "You clearly like El. El clearly likes you. It's not rocket science."

When Mike didn't answer, Robin took it from there.

"Don't wait forever, Mike." She smirked deviously, "because some other man or *woman* will come along and sweep El off her feet." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively, pointing to herself.

Startled, Mike looked at Steve as though for confirmation, even

though he wasn't entirely sure why. He knew Robin was a lesbian, but he looked to her best friend for confirmation of whether or not she was seriously considering asking El out.

Steve just pointed helpfully at the lesbian pride flag Robin had pinned to her purse.

"Okay, *okay*! I like El!" Mike burst out, looking around to make sure no one else had heard him. "I'm just working up the courage to ask her out."

Robin's features softened. "You can't wait forever Mike. Sometimes you just have to take the chance."

Mike sighed in defeat and all the rigidness drained out of him. "I know."

"If you know, you'd better get a move on. You might still be able to catch her."

"What?"

"She didn't leave that long ago. If you run, you might be able to catch her." Robin jerked her head towards the door.

Mike's heart thumped in his chest.

Was he really considering this?

He thought of how ridiculous the whole night had been—Max surprising him by bringing El, the laser tag, the air hockey... her devious smile as she got them in laser tag, the way her eyes shone when she talked about horrible B movies...

Mike knew the answer.

"I'll be right back."

He completely missed Steve and Robin exchanging high fives behind him as he scurried away.

Mike ran outside, ignored Dustin and Lucas's confused calls as he ran

past them, and then out the front door of *the Dungeon*.

The closest subway station was three blocks away, Mike knew if he hurried, he could probably catch Will, Alex and El before they headed down.

He ran.

The chilled night air pressed against his cheeks, his breaths coming out in puffs as he ran towards the station, taking the most direct route. The sidewalks were busy with people, making it difficult for him to weave through and at the same time keep an eye out for that familiar fluffy blue coat.

Just as he was starting to get close to the station, and was losing hope, he spotted her.

"El!" Mike shouted breathlessly. She didn't hear him. He called again, running for all her was worth. Finally, on the third shout, she heard him.

She turned around, eyes scanning the crowd until she spotted him.

"Mike?" He could see her lips move, and she turned to stop Will and Alex. In that time, he caught up with the three of them and doubled over, suddenly winded from what was essentially a two-block sprint.

What he meant to say was:

"El, can I have your number?"

But the moment he opened his mouth, he wondered if he should ask her "do you want to go out sometime?". What ended up coming out of his mouth was instead:

"Do you want my number?"

El's jaw dropped.

It slowly dawned on him what he'd just said, and mortification raked across his forehead.

"I mean—Can I have your phone?" He blurted, which wasn't any better.

He thought he heard a muffled laugh behind her (that sounded suspiciously like Will).

"I mean—" Mike wished the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Could that happen? Maybe he should just jump into a sewer grate.

"I do want your number, thanks for asking." El finally recovered from shock. Her cheeks were bright pink, but she fished her phone out of her pocket and entered something. A moment later, she handed her phone to him.

Mike accepted her phone, marveling that El just saw that *train wreck* and still wanted to have his number. Was it normal to feel so elated and embarrassed at the same time it made you a little lightheaded?

He glanced down at her phone and laughed.

She'd entered his first name as Mike, followed by his last name: *Pterodactyl Arms*.

Grinning, he entered his cell phone number and handed the phone back to her.

Mike went to reach for his phone in his pocket, and then quickly realized in his haste to chase after El, he hadn't worn his jacket, which *of course*, is where he left his phone.

El realized this and said, "I'll text you, then you'll have my number."

He breathed out a sigh of embarrassed relief. "Okay."

"Goodnight, Mike." El smiled shyly, brushing her hair behind her ears before she turned to head back to Will and Alex.

"Night, El."

Mike practically floated back to the Dungeon, the smile never leaving his face.

Even when he got back to the Dungeon and Max just gave him a curious look with a raised eyebrow, or Steve and Robin grinned knowingly, nothing could phase him.

Besides that, Mike's rapid departure was very suddenly forgotten when there was an ecstatic shriek of "YES!"

Mike, Steve, Robin, Max and Lucas all turned to the bar, where Dustin was currently heading back from, a goofy smile on his face, along with a very prominent lipstick mark on his cheek.

Lucas gasped. "Did you?"

Dustin glanced back at the bar, where Suzie was practically skipping as she wiped down the bar. It was a wonder she wasn't floating, she looked so happy.

"I did." Dustin said, unable to stop grinning.

"And?" Steve prompted, impatient.

"We're going out next Friday." Dustin blushed so hard; the tips of his ears went pink.

Steve whooped, and immediately put Dustin in a headlock, giving him a nogie. Robin laughed as Max, Lucas and Mike simultaneously said "*finally!*"

"Will is going to kill you for waiting until he was gone to ask Suzie out." Lucas grinned, patting Dustin on the back once he was finally free of Steve's headlock.

Dustin laughed, "I know."

The Party finished paying up, splitting Dustin's bill between them and put on their coats. It was nearly 2:00 AM by the time they filed out of the bar. Dustin piled in with Steve and Robin in Steve's car, while Lucas, Mike and Max headed back to Lucas's car.

As Lucas cruised towards Max's apartment to drop her off, Mike was distracted by his phone screen lighting up.

Unknown Number: (photo)

Heart beating wildly, Mike opened the unknown number text and a bubble of laughter escaped him before he could stop it. It was a meme, with the words: *I don't always score in air hockey, but when I do, it's on myself.*

He's a goner. If he didn't know this before, he certainly knew now.

It was a great end to the night, the whole rest of the ride home, Mike couldn't stop smiling.

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A/N: I know the question is burning in everyone`s mind: is *Pirahnaconda* a real movie?! The answer is YES. And long story short, you really don't need to watch it because I can vouch that it's truly awful.

I didn`t expect the chapter to go on that long, but here it is! I think this story might be seven or eight chapters now as I am cramming in far too much fluff.

Thank you for your kind reviews, they really make my day! Let me know what you thought about this chapter if you have a moment. Have a great day!

4. dog days are over

"A movie night? I thought the only thing you watch are those trashy soaps?"

El rolled her eyes at Max.

They were alone in the empty coffee shop, Max leaned against the counter, watching El sweep up as she sipped her coffee. She was working late tonight and popped over on her break while El closed up shop.

"Excuse you, I have a *great* sense of cinematic direction." She ignored Max's scoff and kept going, "besides, you like movie nights!"

"I like *good* movie nights." Max smirked into her cup.

El scowled. "Hey! Alex and I picked a great movie."

Mike's number wasn't the only phone number she got the other night at Dustin's birthday.

She sighed dreamily and glanced down at her phone as though she could just summon a text from Mike by thinking about him hard enough. Even the *thought* of the other night made her heart race.

It was just like she'd been daydreaming about for the last two weeks.

Mike chasing after her, breathless, cheeks flushed, hair adorably askew and dark eyes only for her... An excitement so tangible she could almost *taste* it.

He opened his mouth and:

"Do you want my number?"

Her jaw dropped.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't *exactly* like she'd day dreamed, but it was damn close on a different scale of utter *adorableness*.

She could see the embarrassment slap Mike across his cheeks as realization set in, glowing like a huge neon sign that said, "*kill me now*". She was pretty sure he meant to ask for her number, but she put two and two together.

"I mean—can I have your phone?"

You can have anything! Her heart thrummed under her skin.

The stifled laughter behind her finally snapped her out of it. It was only the sheer mortification on Mike's face that barely kept her from giggling hysterically (because not only was what he just said absolutely adorable, but because *Mike. was. Asking. For. her. Number!*) Thank goodness she had a killer poker face, because El didn't let anything show.

"I mean—"

"I do want your number, thanks for asking." She saved him from further embarrassment and smiled shyly up at him. Her heart swelled, knowing that he ran after her from *the Dungeon*, jacketless in late November just to ask her for her number (or, as it happened, offered her his).

She typed his name into her phone, adding the *Pterodactyl Arms* to the last name form because it would be sure to make her smile every time she saw it.

And sure enough, he laughed when he saw what she'd put his name in as. But the smile slipped off his face when he realized he forgot his phone at *the Dungeon*, after just having run all this way to ask for her phone number.

Holy *Batman* was he *cute*.

"I'll text you, then you'll have my number."

The sigh of relief nearly pushed her over the edge and El just barely suppressed the overwhelming urge to kiss him senseless when she saw how relieved he looked.

After she'd bid Mike goodnight, Will slyly brought up the topic of

exchanging cell numbers too, so El had both Will and Alex's cell numbers as well as Mike's.

When El had finally sat down on the subway alone, she'd agonized only for a moment about what to send Mike so he'd have her number. She'd been halfway through typing: *Hi Mike, it's El Hopper!* When a devious idea came to her.

She deleted the partial text and instead pulled up an air hockey meme featuring the 'most interesting man on earth'.

I don't always score in air hockey, but when I do, I score on myself.

El smirked. It was *perfect*.

She sent the text without a second thought and was pleasantly surprised when Mike texted her back a skeleton face only a minute later.

She giggled, immediately firing back a winky face.

She didn't get another response that night, but that was okay because El wasn't sure that could handle any more fluttering nerves, the excitement welling and flooding over in her chest.

That night had been less than a week ago, but El still tingled with warmth every time she thought about it.

When Alex had texted her the just this morning about hosting a bad movie night together, El had jumped on it excitedly. Not only to be able to hang out with Mike again, but to also get more time with the rest of the Party who had so firmly entrenched themselves into Max's heart. She knew Lucas's friends meant a lot to Max, so in extension, they meant a lot to El.

"El."

She hadn't gotten a lot of one on one time with the rest of the Party, but hopefully she could change that soon. The movie was a good step in the right direction.

"El."

Finally, she realized Max was calling her.

"Earth to El?" Max called one last time, smirking.

"Are you in?" El asked hopefully, ignoring her friend's knowing smirk.

"Of course," Max drummed her fingers on the countertop, "I wouldn't miss *this* show for the world."

Somehow, El doubted that Max was talking about the movie. Either way, Max agreed, so she would take what she could get.

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Movie at our place on Saturday. Everyone (plus El ;)) will be there!

The text knocked him on his ass first thing, Thursday morning.

It was from Will, who texted him late last night, but Mike had been working on his application and hadn't glanced at his phone until close to eight AM the next morning.

When he finally saw the text message, it was too late. Will had already messaged the group text chain and everyone confirmed.

Mike tried not to read too much into the winky face, but it made him frown anyways. He knew Will was a smart cookie when it came to people's feelings—Mike was no exception. Especially after the debacle that was Dustin's birthday party, Mike was certain everyone in the Party knew how he felt about El, and it was a little unnerving.

To go from not dating for *three* years to suddenly 'catching feelings' as Dustin so helpfully phrased it one time, it was, for better lack of words, *terrifying*. What if El didn't feel the same way? What if he was just reading way too far into their interactions?

And now that the rest of the Party knew that he kind of, sort of, most definitely had a crush on El, Mike knew it was only a matter of time

before he was swarmed. His friends seemed to have learned from last time, and despite the annoying knowing looks and the smirks whenever El was mentioned, they largely backed off about the whole dating thing.

Mike also had a feeling that this might have something to do with Dustin's first and second dates with Suzie. Will and Lucas's attentions were elsewhere for now, but he knew this sweet spot would run out soon.

With that looming over his head, and Robin's warnings of not to wait, Mike had come to a conclusion: he wanted to ask El out on a date.

But of course, once Mike reached this conclusion, it became glaringly apparent that he was just not equipped to deal with this.

How should he ask her? Text? A phone call? A carrier pigeon? Nothing felt quite right.

It was a question he mulled over hard, only to still come up answerless by Saturday night. The thought of seeing El and knowing that he wanted to ask her out but not knowing about how to do it sent him into a stressed tizzy all day. He couldn't help but feel like someone walking into a final test who hadn't studied and was completely unprepared.

Finally, when Saturday night came and he was standing outside of Will's door, it was too late. Whatever happened, happened. Hopefully if he did manage to ask El out, it would go better than his attempt at asking for her phone number.

"Hey Mike! Come on in." Will greeted happily, swinging the door open for him.

Mike grinned nervously. "Sorry I'm late, I got held up at work."

It wasn't a complete lie. It had been a very busy day at the precinct, somehow the closer it got to Christmas, the more it seemed like the workload doubled, but Mike had lost track of time while stressing out over seeing El tonight.

"It's okay, Dustin and Suzie got held up too. They said they're almost

here." Will said fondly, rolling his eyes.

The two new lovebirds had a successful date on the Friday following Dustin's birthday, and had officially been on a second date before the two decided very promptly that they wanted to be boyfriend and girlfriend. It was a surprise how quickly they decided this, but after it had taken them so long to go out on their *first* date, perhaps it wasn't really that much of a surprise. If they continued at their previous pace, the Party would all be great *grandparents* before they took it a step further.

Mike threw his coat on the hook and kicked off his shoes before stepping further into the apartment, following Will.

"Hey man." Lucas greeted happily, as though he hadn't seen him just this afternoon.

Mike returned the greeting and exchanged a wordless fist bump with Max, who was lounging on the couch, her legs draped lazily over Lucas's lap.

"Hey Alex." Mike greeted, calling into the kitchen. Alex popped his head out from behind the kitchen counter and waved.

"Hi Mike, El's here too!" He exclaimed, closing the cupboard which had hidden El.

She was behind the kitchen counter, dressed in Will's apron that read '*kiss the gay cook*'. She wore a simple pair of leggings and an oversized emerald jumper that hung just so from her shoulder, exposing her collarbone and the creamy skin of her shoulder. Her hair was pulled into a half-up lopsided bun, which jiggled as she spun around to wave.

"Hi Mike." El chirped with a happy grin, a smear of something that looked suspiciously like white chocolate across her cheek.

"Hi El." He greeted, trying to sound cool and composed despite his heart feeling like it was going to burst. "Do you guys need a hand with anything?" Mike offered, stepping closer to the kitchen.

"I think we're just about done in here. Could you take that tray to the

living room for us if you wouldn't mind?" Alex asked, pointing a chocolate covered hand towards a platter with delicious looking chocolate treats on it.

Mike noticed Alex also had a smear of white chocolate on his chin, a stark contrast between the darkness of his skin. It kind of looked like a really bad soul patch from the position and shape of the chocolate smear. He tried not to laugh, biting the corner of his cheek to stop the smile.

"You guys are my guinea pigs tonight; I'm trying out some new recipes before Christmas hits." Alex grinned, gesturing to the chocolate balls, "El was kind enough to help me finish."

"It was my pleasure." El said sincerely, doing a silly little bow.

Mike's heart flipped.

"We're just going to make some popcorn and then we'll be right there." Alex explained, drawing his attention back.

"Sounds great." Mike nodded and grabbed the platter from the counter, turning to head back towards the couches. When he turned around, Max, Will and even *Lucas* turned away and started conversing, like they all hadn't been watching Mike's every move with his interaction with El.

He made sure to shoot them a scowl when he sat down, but was interrupted by the arrival of Dustin and Suzie.

"Hi guys." Suzie greeted cheerfully, her cheeks rosy from the cold and eyes sparkling with excitement. Despite having only just gone out on two dates together, and officially becoming boyfriend and girlfriend, Dustin and Suzie reminded everyone of an old married couple who'd been together for fifty plus years. It was adorable yet sickening how cute they were.

By the time Dustin and Suzie had said hello to everyone and got settled, Alex and El appeared with the bowls of popcorn.

"Is everyone ready?" Alex asked excitedly.

"I'm just going to run to the washroom." Mike hopped up and headed towards the hallway.

He was back in a minute and a half flat, but when he walked back into the living room he realized he *really* hadn't thought this through.

Suzie and Dustin cozied up on one end of the three-seater while Alex and Will cuddled on the other. Even Lucas and Max were all comfy looking on the loveseat, Max's legs draped across Lucas as he absently massaged her calves.

That left...

Oh no.

The round chair in the corner.

The chair Will himself nicknamed "the cuddle chair", because it was literally impossible not to cuddle in it. It was round, a nest chair—Mike vaguely recalled.

Of course, the seating arrangement was logical. The others would want to sit with their significant others and Mike had been a fool to think otherwise. But he honestly thought one of the other pairs would take the aforementioned "cuddle chair", leaving the loveseat or half of the couch for he and El (the seventh and eighth wheel, respectively).

He thought wrong.

He wasn't among friends; he was in a den of *wolves*.

Lucas, Max, Will, Alex, Dustin and even Suzie waited to see what he would do, their smug gazes watching him panic. Mike realized the only chivalrous option was for him to take the floor and for El to take the chair. He didn't mind, he was adaptable that way.

Before Mike could offer the chair to El, she returned from the kitchen, popcorn bowl in hand.

"Looks a little cozy." El looked at the chair and back to Mike with an unreadable expression. "I don't mind taking the floor if you want the chair."

Shit. This was not how it was supposed to go.

"Oh—er, no I can take the floor, you should have the chair." Mike disagreed politely.

"The chair is big enough for two people." Will called helpfully. The innocent twinkle in his eyes was total *bullshit*.

"Why don't we share the chair then?" El offered, "better than one of us be on the floor."

What could he say to that?

If he still insisted sitting on the floor, El would think he didn't want to sit close to her. And it's not that Mike didn't want to sit next to El—if anything, it was the *very* opposite. But this had clearly been a setup—and he was so going to get back at his friends for this.

Mike knew when it was time to admit defeat. "Deal."

She wordlessly handed him the popcorn bowl before she crawled onto the chair and got settled.

Mike handed her back the bowl of popcorn before it was his turn to climb onto the chair. He quickly found out there was no possible way to sit in this chair without being pressed up against the other person from shoulder to calf. He tried to minimize the contact, not wanting to make El uncomfortable, but realized that this just wasn't an option.

"Do you have enough room?" El asked when he kept squirming.

Mike flushed. "Y-yeah." He nodded while mentally cursing his best friends. He stilled, not wanting to bother El with his movements. She seemed at ease, popcorn bowl propped in her lap, hip flush against him. He tried not to think too hard about how his body felt like it would spontaneously combust at any moment.

"Are you ready to have your minds blown?" Alex asked excitedly once everyone settled in.

"What's this movie called again?"

"Birdemic: Shock and Terror."

And before anyone could protest, Alex and El shared a grin and pressed play.

There was no way to describe it other than:

Awful.

The movie was awful, but it was one of those so-bad-it's-good kind of awful. Awkward acting, story lines that made no sense whatsoever and a cheesy script, it had them all laughing or groaning, and Mike had to admit, it was fun.

By the time the "birdemic" part of the movie began (which was way, way, way further into the movie than anyone would have anticipated), everyone was laughing so hard they could barely breathe. Lucas actually fell off the couch with a loud thump.

Mike tried to focus on the movie, but every time El laughed it sent a shiver down his spine. They were sitting so close together that if he turned, it would be nothing to kiss her—and this was a thought he was entirely too aware of.

After a while, when a few particularly cringe worthy scenes passed by without a peep from El, he glanced down at her to see what was going on.

She was *asleep*. Her eyes were closed, her head rested against his shoulder, breaths quiet and deep.

Everything in Mike screeched to a halt and it wasn't until his mind urged him to resume breathing that he even realized he was holding his breath.

Cute, cute, *cute*!

How could one person be this cute? Her managed to rip his eyes off of El and tried not to move as he fought to return his attention to the movie. She mentioned she had a busy week, so she probably needed the rest and he was loathe to wake her.

The movie ended only twenty minutes later, and still, El hardly stirred even as everyone else began to talk about the movie.

"Why didn't you warn us, El?" Dustin groaned loudly.

There was no response.

"El?" Dustin sat up to attention, peering over towards the nest chair.

"Shh." Mike held up a finger to his lips as quickly as he could while taking care not to jostle El. "She's sleeping."

Max sat up with more interest this time, a grin like the Cheshire cat stretched across her lips. "Aww! So sweet." She cooed, snapping a photo deftly with her cellphone before he could react.

"Is El one of those people who can fall asleep anywhere?" Lucas asked, eyebrow raised.

Max nodded. "Yep. One time I caught her falling asleep, standing up at her kitchen counter."

"Wow," Will's eyebrows shot up, "that's impressive."

"I talked to her for five minutes before I realized she was asleep."

Everyone chuckled at that.

"Oh, it's late Dustybun." Suzie glanced at the clock on the wall, "I have to go in to the office tomorrow morning. Walk me to the station?" She batted her eyelashes hopefully at her now boyfriend.

Lucas snickered at '*Dustybun*', but Dustin looked completely besotted and therefore did not care (although he did hold up his middle finger in an almost mindless gesture to Lucas).

"Sure." He hopped up, pulling Suzie up from the couch.

"We'd better get going too." Lucas agreed, "should we wake up El?"

Max shook her head. "Let her sleep for a minute, we'll help clean up and then Wheeler can wake her up."

Mike stared at Max, wide-eyed. Before he could protest, the remaining Party members were up and helping tidy the living room, leaving him and El alone.

He sighed and glanced down again at El, who was blissfully unaware of the situation.

"El?" He whispered, hating to break that comfortable silence. She didn't respond at first, so Mike very gently reached down and shook her shoulder. "El, it's time to wake up."

"Don't wanna." She sighed, like she wasn't fully awake yet, but somehow aware enough to answer him. He couldn't help but smile.

"The movie is over. Everyone is getting ready to head home."

She made a small, sleepy noise of affirmation, like she was listening, but she was also on the precipice of drifting to back to sleep. It was the *cutest* noise he had ever heard.

This was a scene Mike could get used to. El, dozing against him, curled up and soft and relaxed. It made something in him ache.

"Would you like to go on a date with me sometime?"

It slipped out. Mike wasn't even sure if he heard himself right, and then a cold dose of reality crashed over him when he realized that *holy shit he just asked El out*.

El didn't respond right away, but she shifted as though she were trying to get more comfortable on his shoulder. His heart sank, until she sleepily said:

"I'd love to."

Heart hammering in his chest, he nearly melted at the little smile on El's lips as she dozed against him. She was stunning. He tried not to move, despite feeling like he needed to get up and do a dance—or shout from the rooftops that El had said yes! They were going to go on an actual *date*!

"Okay Wheeler, time to wake up sleeping beauty." Max quipped,

returning from the kitchen.

He just *barely* refrained from jumping. Still, it didn't stop his face from turning red under Max's sharp gaze. Had she heard him ask El out?

She seemed to take pity on him. "I'm going to go get my coat on. Could you get her up? Thanks."

Mike sighed in relief when Max turned back around and headed towards the foyer.

"El. It's time to go." He shook her a little more this time, though just as gentle.

Finally, El groaned and her eyes opened. She blinked sleepily, looking up at him and focusing on his face. For a moment neither of them moved, he could see the confusion in her gaze before it morphed to understanding and El relaxed against him again.

"I fell asleep, huh?" She sighed and stretched, looking around the room. "Whoa, the movie's done?"

Mike grinned. "Yeah, thanks for that, by the way." It was a marvel that he could string together a sentence around El right now. Was she going to ask him about the date? Should he bring it up?

"What?" She said innocently, "Birdemic is a national treasure."

Mike snorted.

"El, you'd better be moving that sweet butt of yours!" Max called from the foyer of the apartment, clearly out of patience.

"I'd better get going." El said reluctantly, "thanks for letting me nap on you."

"No problem." Mike said, heat rising in his cheeks.

They somehow managed to untangle themselves from the 'cuddle chair' without too many awkward moments.

By the time they managed to make it to the front door of the apartment, everyone else was bundled up and ready to go, leaving El and Mike to hurriedly put on their coats and hats.

"Thank you so much for hosting the movie night." El thanked Will and Alex with a hug, "I'll have to host next time. We can watch Birdemic two."

Alex grinned, while everyone else groaned in response.

"Next time you make me watch another movie like this, we're playing a drinking game." Dustin grumbled good naturedly.

El's eyes lit up. "I have just the movie in mind."

"That's what worries me." Max rolled her eyes, "now let's go."

They finished saying their goodbyes to Alex and Will and headed downstairs. Mike desperately tried to think of a way to bring up their date, but the closer they got to the glass doors of the apartment entrance, the more he realized he was running out of time.

Maybe El hadn't really heard him?

His heart sunk in his chest.

Of all the times to ask El out on a date... he had to choose the moment when she was probably asleep.

He was an *idiot*.

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At first, El thought it was a dream.

A really, *really* good dream.

"*Would you like to go with me on a date sometime?*"

Mike's low, earnest voice seeped into her dream like warm honey.

She sighed. *I'd love to.*

The next thing she knew she came to, leaning against his shoulder. He had this indescribable expression on his face as she blinked sleepily, trying to piece together why she was waking up beside Mike (not that she minded *one* bit). It wasn't a bad expression, in fact, quite the opposite. It made her feel warm all over.

Too soon, they were forced to move from the chair, El only mildly embarrassed that she fell asleep on Mike and missed a good chunk of the movie. At least she'd seen *Birdemic* before and admittedly, it was a great nap.

Mike seemed to grow just a little distant in the time they said goodbye at Will's apartment building front door, like he was folding in on himself. She wasn't sure what had happened in such a short period of time, but El was already looking through her stash of funny photos and memes to send one to him and cheer him up.

"So." Max rounded on her as soon as they climbed into Lucas's car. "You're going on a date with Wheeler." She grinned.

"*What!*" Lucas and El both exclaimed at the same time

Max blinked in surprise. "Why are you surprised?" She directed her question to El.

"Wait," El gasped, surprising the heck out of Lucas, "that wasn't a dream?"

Max groaned and turned around in her seat. "No. It was real. So cute it almost made me nauseous. You really thought it was a dream?"

"Wait a second, back up a little—*Mike* asked you out on a date?" Lucas said excitedly, peering at El in the rear view mirror.

"I thought I was dreaming!" El squeaked, running her hand down her face in mortification. No wonder Mike had wilted.

"I *knew* you liked Wheeler." Max crowed victoriously.

"And I *knew* Mike liked you!" Lucas said excitedly, wagging his eyebrows at El in the mirror.

El flushed at Lucas's words. She suspected... because otherwise why would he have asked her on a date? But the confirmation was a really nice boost.

"I do." She confirmed, "he's really cute."

"Awww." Lucas and Max chimed, both unable to stop grinning.

The rest of the car ride Max and Lucas had mercy on her, letting her off the hook to process the excited, dreadful pounding of her heart. Forty minutes later, she was sitting in her bed, idly fiddling with her phone.

In the end, El decided to call him. There was something inside her that urged her to do this now. She needed to clear this up, because she couldn't have missed her chance with Mike.

He answered on the sixth ring.

"Hello?" His voice was thick with sleep and El glanced at the clock.

Shit, she hadn't realized what time it was. By the time Lucas and Max dropped her off it was shortly after one. No wonder he sounded tired, he probably got home before she had and was in bed.

"Hello?" Mike repeated once more, this time confused.

"H-hi! It's me, El."

There was a pause.

"El?" Mike repeated, surprise tinged his voice. She could hear the whisper of fabric as he shifted. "*What's up? Is everything okay?*"

"Everything's great." El assured him hurriedly, trying not to focus on how her stomach swooped at the concern lacing his voice. "I just uh... I had to call you and ask you about our date?"

"*Our date?*" Mike repeated, his voice cracking. He sounded much

more awake now.

El's heart sank. *Had* she been dreaming? Had Max been wrong?

He let out a breath.

"I thought you were asleep and didn't hear me." He chuckled, but it was breathy with nerves.

El giggled, equally breathy as she lay down on her bed, phone cradled against her ear. "I was kind of asleep? I thought it was a dream. A really *good* dream."

His breath hitched.

"Do you have something particular in mind for our date?" She asked curiously, barely stumbling over the 'd' word.

"I was thinking... we could go skating in the park? And maybe get a hot chocolate after?" His voice was tentative, like he was worried she wouldn't like the idea.

He couldn't be more wrong.

"That sounds amazing." El agreed happily, fighting the strangest urge to scream into her pillow with excitement.

She was going on a date with *Mike*.

Wow.

This was the most excited she had ever been about a first date. It was a foreign feeling, a Molotov cocktail of nerves mixed with excitement.

"It's a date then." He said huskily, the low tone of his voice made El's head swim. What was he *doing* to her? *"Are you free Friday?"*

"Friday is good." El confirmed, even as internally she lamented about how far away Friday feels. Six days. How is she going to make it six whole days knowing she's going to be going on a date with Mike?

Mike made a noise of affirmation, but neither moved to say goodbye.

"It was really nice to see you tonight, Mike." El admitted into the phone, somehow feeling slightly braver without the face to face.

"Same here. Except, you know, seeing you, not me." Mike stumbled over the words awkwardly.

El giggled, but then realized she should let Mike go because it was nearing 2:00AM in the morning and she was going to be a zombie tomorrow if she didn't head to bed.

"I guess I should let you get back to sleep." El said quietly, rolling over. She could hear Mike shift on the other end of the line.

"You should get some sleep too. If you're not awake to make Mayfield her coffee, who knows what will happen." He teased.

"For the good of the precinct, I'll go to sleep." El agreed, smiling ear to ear.

"Goodnight, EL."

"Night, Mike."

Finally, they hung up and El flopped over on her bed, grinning.

She could get used to saying goodnight to Mike everyday.

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"You *what*?"

Dustin gaped at Mike in amazement.

Will dropped his sandwich in surprise.

It was only Lucas, who knew this already, who grinned and nodded like a proud mama bear.

"I asked El out on a date and she said yes." Mike explained again, slower this time.

"When did you ask her out?" Will asked excitedly.

"At the movie night." Mike mumbled, cheeks tinged pink.

"Yes!" Dustin fist pumped excitedly, "I *knew* you liked El!"

He said it so loud, he was sure that everyone in the precinct must have heard him. The four friends were having lunch in the break room, Will had his afternoon free and decided to drop by for lunch when Mike had texted everyone that he had some news.

Mike ducked his head in embarrassment. "Say it a little louder next time."

"You know I will gladly rent a bullhorn and shout it from the rooftops if you wanted me to buddy." Dustin grinned.

"Never mind that," Will said impatiently, "what are you doing for your first date? And why does Lucas clearly look like he already knows? We need *all* the details."

Mike shot Lucas an incredulous look. "How *did* you know?"

Caught on the spot, Lucas decided to come clean. "El might have let it slip in the car ride home the other night."

"She did? What else did she say?" Mike asked earnestly.

"She might have said that you're cute." Lucas grinned when he got the desired reaction and Mike turned bright pink.

"Really?"

Lucas nodded.

"Details, please! You're *killing* me." Will whined.

Mike finally seemed to snap out of it, and gave an apologetic smile. "We're going skating in the park and then grab some hot chocolate

after."

Will and Dustin pretended to swoon.

"So romantic." Will sighed.

"We're happy for you, man." Dustin said sincerely.

"Thanks." Mike smiled warmly, looking somehow both extremely nervous and excited all at once. "So Will, how is the new job going?" He clearly was done talking about the subject of him and El for now, and everyone let the topic change slide.

Lucas had known about Mike asking El out for three days. He knew Mike could be a very private person ever since his breakup... and at first Lucas wasn't sure if Mike would tell them before the date, but he was glad that wasn't the case. It had nearly killed him to keep tight lipped about this, but Max warned him to let Mike tell them in his own time.

It paid off. Seeing Mike so excited like this was a really good change. He never wanted to see Mike the way he was after his breakup again. But, if El's reaction in the car was anything to go by, El felt the exact same way and Lucas definitely didn't have to worry.

He smiled.

It was going to be a good week.

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It didn't really sink in that she was going on a date with Mike until the day before their date, when he texted her a shy reminder and to "*dress warm*".

All week they'd been sending silly memes back and forth, or "how was your day today?" kind of texts, but the topic of the date was largely laid on the backburner, for which she was grateful. The week

would have been a wash if she thought too hard about their date and as it is, the text left El in a dizzying state of euphoria, excitement and nervous nausea because holy shit, she's going on a date with *Mike*.

All day long Friday she drove Kali up the wall with her fluttering, too-excited movements in the kitchen and her giddy non-stop smile.

Finally, an exasperated Kali snapped at her to "*go home and get ready for your date*", because she's wasn't getting anything done at the cafe. El obliged, heading home to begin prepping for the evening.

Luckily, Max was available to help her not freak out.

"You could wear a *flour* sack and you'd blow Wheeler's mind." Max snorted from her seat on the edge of El's bed.

"Not helping." El whined, desperately rifling through her closet like she had nothing to wear.

Max flopped over on the bed. "Okay, you're going skating, right?" So that rules out anything too fancy. You need to dress warm... so go with something cute, but that you can comfortably sweat in."

El stared at her friend, like a wide-eyed deer in the headlights.

Max sighed and lurched up off the bed. She gave El a gentle push out of the way and expertly dove into her closet, pulling out a dark maroonish purple sweater dress with a turtle neck and a pair of black plain leggings. She tossed them over her shoulder to El, who caught them with a small fumble.

"Where's that pretty pair of gold earrings you wore the other week?"

El pointed dumbly towards her dresser.

Max quickly pinpointed the small lacquer jewellery box and rifled through it, fishing out the simple but eye-catching pair of gold dangling earrings with a circle and crescent shape and placed them aside.

"Now, where's your cute bras?" Max asked, glancing over her shoulder at El.

El's jaw dropped. "Why?"

"Oh please," Max snorted, "I see the way you look at Wheeler. I'm not saying you guys are going to hop into bed on the first date, but it's good to be prepared if that's what you end up wanting."

El blushed but said, "third drawer down"

Max dutifully rummaged through the drawer, before deciding on a lacey black (but not too over the top) bra and matching set of underwear. Again, she tossed the clothing to El.

"Call me when you're dressed, and we'll do your hair." Max said, walking out of El's bedroom before she could say another word.

El's heart swelled so large for a moment she choked up. She was so lucky to have Max as a friend.

She got dressed quickly and called Max back into the bedroom, surprising her by tackling her in a hug as soon as she walked back through the door.

"You're the best." El gushed, squeezing the startled Max close.

"I know." Max tried to say with her usual snarky bravado, but her cheeks were flushed and she looked pleased.

Once they parted, Max motioned for El to sit on the edge of the bed so she could reach her hair.

As Max began to divide the sections of El's hair, she asked, "so you really like Wheeler, huh?"

It was a quiet, earnest question and El could detect the underlying question within the question.

El knew she was pretty tight-lipped about her past romance; it had taken her a long time to tell Max even a fraction of what had happened with her previous relationship... she squashed the thought down before it could take root.

Tonight was not the night for that kind of thought.

Most of all, El trusted Max. She maybe hadn't been very forthright in admitting her feelings, but that needed to change. She trusted Max *completely*.

"I do." El's heart skipped a beat at the admission, "I haven't felt this way about anyone in a long time, and we haven't even gone on a date yet."

"I'm happy for you." Max said quietly, but El could hear the sincerity in her voice, and once more El marveled at how *lucky* she was.

A few minutes passed and they talked about other things, catching up here and there before Max finished.

"Done." She said happily, stepping back. "Go have a look."

El got up from the ground and went to the mirror at the corner of her room. Max had outdone herself. It was a tight, beautiful Dutch braid, Max had left just a few tendrils to frame her face.

"It's lovely, thank you." El crowed happily. The braid would be perfect for skating, to keep her hair out of her face.

"Wheeler's head is going to pop off when he sees you." Max grinned in triumph.

El giggled before glancing at the time. "Shoot, I should get going pretty quick." Max had really worked her magic, distracting her from freaking out about the date.

Max and El quickly prepped to leave the apartment, walking to the subway together before they finally parted ways, El trying to fight the breathless excitement welling her chest and threatening to overwhelm her.

"Have a great date." Max bid El happily with a hug, "text me how it went later. I don't need to know *all* the details though." Max waggled her eyebrows suggestively, with a grin.

El laughed, "you're awful."

With that, Max got on the train and left El to head the rest of the way

to her date alone.

El boarded the subway train and just as she sat down, her phone beeped.

She drew it out of her pocket and snorted. It was a text from Kali.

It only said:

Get it, girl.

El planned to.

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Sheer nerves propelled Mike to arrive at the park bench he and El were meeting at nearly a half hour early. He wanted to make absolute certain that he was there on time, having thought of all the things that could have delayed him from getting to their date on time.

The subway could have broken down, all of them. The buses too. Or maybe a water main would burst and he wouldn't be able to get around the water as it got higher and higher!

Of course, none of that happened and he was just ridiculously early.

As six-thirty crept closer and closer, he practically vibrated with nervous excitement. How did people even date anymore? It had been three years since Mike had done anything like this. That was a *lifetime* in dating years. What if he messed up?

All week long Mike had been looking forward to his date with El. He was glad he told Lucas, Dustin and Will about the date earlier this week, and of course they were elated for him.

This morning, Lucas pretended to wipe a tear from his eye and said, "my little boy is all grown up."

That was nothing compared to Dustin, who bought him his very own copy of *Flirting for Dummies*.

Will, the wisest of them all, just wished Mike good luck. (What Mike didn't realize was that Will slipped a pamphlet into his back pocket with a "be safe" health guide to sex and dating, complete with courtesy condom, and he wouldn't find this out until *much* later).

Despite all their trolling, Mike knew his friends wished him well.

"Were you waiting long?"

Mike looked up and promptly forgot how to be a person.

El looked *beautiful*. Stuffed into her fluffy blue coat, she wore a black beanie and pink, chunky knitted scarf. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, but her eyes twinkled in excitement.

He practically jumped off of the bench when he realized he'd stared at her for a moment too long.

"No!" He blurted out, and then corrected himself, "I mean, no. I haven't been waiting long." It was a little white lie, but it was his fault for arriving a half hour early.

El smiled. "I'm glad."

He couldn't help but smile back, the nerves within him somehow simultaneously quelling, and exploding all at once.

"Ready?"

She nodded happily. "Lead the way."

The two took off at a leisurely stroll, heading towards the centre of the park where the ice rink was setup.

"How was your week?" Mike asked, desperately trying not to focus too hard on the fact that they were on a *date*. If he thought too hard about it, he was definitely going to panic and that was the last thing he needed right now.

"My week was good! Busy, but good. Yours?"

"It was good." Mike agreed with a soft smile, "I've been working on an application so that took up a lot of time."

El looked to him in curious interest. "An application? For what?"

Mike flushed under her gaze. "Er... It's nothing really, I'm just applying for a position that opened up in the precinct in the cyber crimes division."

It was silly, Mike had been working in the IT department for a few years now, while simultaneously taking courses whenever he could once he learned that he was genuinely interested in cyber crime. When the opportunity opened up at the station, Will, Lucas and Dustin persuaded him to go for it. But the application was a brutal, soul crushing process as most applications were.

"That doesn't sound like nothing, that sounds awesome! I'm sure you'll do great." El said sincerely, leaning against him for just the briefest of moments as though to press home how much she did believe in him.

"Thanks." He said bashfully, and then he did a double take as the ice rink came into view.

The rink was beautiful. It was in the centre of the park, soft, glowing lights were strung from the trees and lamp posts. The centrepiece was the towering lit Christmas tree in the middle of the ice. Soft holiday music played from the large speakers, combined with excited chatter and laughter from people skating, or the leaning against the outer railings of the rink.

"Wow." El breathed beside him, drinking in the twinkling lights and the festive atmosphere.

Mike, looked back down at El and couldn't help but silently agree.

Wow is right.

"Should we go get our skates?" She asked, pointing towards the booth to the right of the rink. It was modeled to look like a ski chalet, the

words '*Skate Rentals*' in big blue cursive letters hung on a wooden sign directly above the concession like window.

Mike nodded and they went to stand in the small line of people. Luckily the rink wasn't too busy tonight.

Once it was their turn, they ordered their skates in the proper sizes. At the exact same moment El and Mike reached for their wallets.

"I've got this." Mike assured El, who hesitated. "I invited you out, it's my treat."

El pinkened and put her wallet away. "Thanks. I'll get the hot chocolate, okay?"

He grinned. "You drive a hard bargain."

She laughed.

Once he finished paying for the skates, they found an unoccupied bench not too far off and sat down to lace up.

"When was the last time you went skating?" El asked as they laced up their skates.

Mike paused, trying to wrack his brain. "I think... maybe two years? It's been a while. You?"

"I've only ever skated one time before." El admitted nervously, eyeing the ice. "I slipped and fell so hard I couldn't sit down for a week."

Mike's mouth moved into a tiny "oh" of surprise.

"We can do something else if you want to, I don't mind." He offered immediately.

El shook her head determinedly. "I want to. I just might need a little help is all."

"I can do that." Mike agreed, relieved.

El blushed and looked down at her skates. "Thanks."

A few minutes later, Mike stood first and took a few tentative steps, making sure his skates were tight enough.

El did the same, and gave a satisfied nod once she was happy with the results.

He led the way to the ice, stepping out carefully with one foot, and then the other. It didn't take him very long to get the feel of it again. He turned around and held out his gloved hands to El, his heart made strange little leaps between its steady rhythm.

Warmth tingled in his fingertips as she caught his hand in hers and held. She stepped onto the ice tentatively, like a newborn deer gaining its legs, she wobbled onto the ice, holding on to Mike's gloved hands like a lifeline.

"Okay, I got this." El was so focused on moving her feet across the ice, it was a really good thing Mike was steering the both of them. He never let her hands go, maneuvering them around the other skaters. They didn't go fast, but eventually El could look up from the ice.

"Where did you learn to skate?" She asked after she was finally able to concentrate on a little more than her feet.

"Nancy taught me and Holly when we were younger." Mike admitted, embarrassed.

El didn't let that linger.

"That is so sweet." She gushed, "where are your sisters now?"

"Nancy is in New York, she's an investigative journalist. Holly is in her second first year of university in Indianapolis."

El nodded, "they sound wonderful."

"You might get to meet them soon," Mike remarked without thinking. He panicked, realizing that meeting his family might sound too serious too soon and he really didn't want to spook her. "I mean—if you'd like to. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Mike." El smiled fondly, drawing him out of his panicked rambling,

"I'd love to meet your sisters."

"Oh." Warmth spread down his spine and to the tips of his toes, "okay."

She smiled, and then said, "want to race?"

Mike looked around the rink and then at El, surprised. "Are you sure?"

Her legs still wobbled a little, but El held strong to her conviction. "I think I've got the hang of it."

She most certainly did *not* have the hang of it.

As soon as El released one of his gloved mittens, she lurched, her feet sliding out from under her. Luckily, Mike managed grab her, but unluckily, it threw them both off balance and they landed in a slow, awkward fall on the ice with a grunt.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked worriedly, quickly peeling himself up off the ice while trying to check over El for any injuries. She was shaking, and it took him a moment to realize she was laughing.

"Okay, so maybe I'll hold off on the racing for now." El giggled as Mike hauled her up.

"You're competitive." Mike said in a teasingly accusatory tone.

"Guilty." El grinned, "you win this round."

Mike laughed, and they resumed their slow, steady pace around the ice.

For nearly forty minutes they did lazy laps around the Christmas tree in the centre, talking about work, or more on Mike's application, or about how El and Kali got into the coffee business. Mike almost forgot they were on their first date, he was so at ease. Talking with El was like breathing. It was like he didn't need to be anything but himself around her.

She only toppled over two other times, luckily neither of the falls

were hard and she always laughed it off. Their gloved hands stayed joined the whole time, even as El purchased hot chocolate for the both of them and they took a break by the wall of the rink.

Once they finished their hot chocolate, Mike and El coasted to a stop in front of the towering Christmas tree, pausing to admire the view up close. It's perfect. The beautiful, lit tree and strung lights were a picture perfect backdrop against the fluffy, gently falling snow.

"Beautiful." El breathed, before blinking in surprise when a big, fat snow flake landed on her nose. She looked up, craning her neck to watch the fluffy snow.

Before Mike realized what was happening, El flailed as her skates slipped out from beneath her, her centre of gravity thrown off as she looked up. He moved unthinkingly and snagged her around the waist, steadying the both of them.

"Don't *fall* for me just yet." Mike teased, parroting her words from the party that seemed so long ago.

He thought he got the drop on her, but like always, El seemed much more composed than he was.

She leaned in close, her breath fanning against his ear, "too late."

His breath caught in his throat.

El smirked in reply, curling her fist almost sensually around his scarf. Before he realized what she was up to, she tugged his scarf, bringing his face down to her level. For a breath, their eyes met. His heart thumped hard in his chest, but he knew he would have get used to feeling like his heart was about to burst whenever El was around.

Their noses brushed, and Mike's lashes fluttered closed as she slowly pressed her lips against his. She sighed against his lips, her breath intoxicating. She tastes sweet, like hot chocolate and spice and something distinctly El.

His hands move of their own accord and he cupped her face, eliciting a surprised squeak from her.

"Your gloves are wet." She giggled against his lips. She reached up and caught his gloved hand in hers, breaking the kiss reluctantly. She looked up at him with a dazed expression that made the breath whoosh right out of his lungs.

After a moment, he realized he was still staring and blushed brightly. "Oops."

"It's okay." She assured him, "I think we're both soaked, it might be time to turn in the skates before we catch a cold." She glanced towards the skate rental booth.

Between the multiple spills on the ice and the gently falling snow, Mike and El were damp. It would only be a matter of time before they caught a chill at this rate, but Mike never wanted this night to end.

"Can I walk you to the station?"

El perked up at that, smiling brightly. "That would be great."

He returned her smile and led the way towards the rink exit. It didn't take them long to unlace their skates and turn them back in. By now, Mike noticed El begin to shiver from the cold, so it was definitely a good time to head home.

"May I?" He motioned putting his arm around her, and El clued in pretty quick. She nodded and he gently wrapped his arm around her while they started to walk. The little sigh of content she let out when he pulled her close almost made him melt into a puddle there and then. Her shivering subsided as they slowly walked towards the station.

It didn't take long to reach the station, but at least it was warmer in the underground than it was outside.

"I had a great time tonight, Mike." El said shyly, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink.

How had he gotten so lucky?

"I had a great time too."

"Would you..." El and Mike started and stopped at the same time, and then laughed.

"You first." Mike grinned, his stomach flipping excitedly.

"Would you like to go out again sometime soon?" She asked, her dark gaze hopeful.

Mike swallowed thickly. "I would really like that, El."

There was something in her gaze that made his stomach swoop, and this time he presses his lips against hers. It's short, and sweet, El's eyelashes flutter closed for a split second before he pulled back, the familiar chime indicating the train is about to arrive interrupting them.

"You *really* know how to ace a first date, Mike." El blinked dazedly.

He blushed, speechless.

The train pulled up, and El surprised him this time by pecking him on the cheek as she turned to go. "I'm really looking forward to the next one."

Holy *hell*, he was too.

He stood, rooted to the spot until the train moved from the station, El waved at him from her seat on the train as it zoomed by.

On his way home that night, Mike was fairly certain he freaked a number of people out because he was smiling so hard.

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For the rest of the week, Mike's life could only be described best by the title of Belinda Carlisle's song: "*Heaven is a Place on Earth*".

After Mike and El's first date, they'd fallen into a comfortable routine

with talking to one another. Every morning he texted El, and almost every evening she would call him to ask how his day was.

Their next date was scheduled for Friday night, they were going to order takeout and watch a movie. The pre-Christmas run up always seemed to be nuts no matter what job you had, but El was especially busy. It would be a good way for both of them to relax, and Mike was already looking forward to it so much.

There was only one, inexplicable snag.

Mike didn't understand why, but lately he felt as though he'd been getting the stink eye from Captain Hopper, and he couldn't figure it out. They'd been pretty timely with their IT tickets, fixing what needed to be fixed as fast as they were able, they hadn't gotten in the way of any of the detectives (except for maybe Max, but she didn't count).

Finally, things came to a head when Hopper, for the third time that week, assigned Mike overtime without really saying why.

And then, it hit him. Mike realized that Hopper must have heard the rumour that he had the hots for him! That would make anyone uncomfortable. Heck, the idea still made Mike shudder. So, after a briefing one day, Mike decided to talk to the captain.

"Sir," Mike began hesitantly once he'd finished briefing the captain on any IT concerns.

Hopper gave him a scowl in response. "What is it, Wheeler?"

"I know you must have heard the rumours that I have the hots for you," Mike blurted out, noting how Hopper's eyebrows raised nearly into his hairline. He kept going, otherwise he would *never* be able to bring this mortifying topic up again. "I need to assure you, that I do not, and I cannot say this enough, I do *NOT* have the hots for you."

There was a long, horrible moment of silence.

Hopper finally leaned back, let out a strained sigh and said: "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I just assumed the rumour was about you and my daughter."

Mike stared.

Hopper stared back.

"What?"

"My daughter." The captain said slowly, "you took her skating? About this tall? Brown hair? Brown eyes? Is any of this ringing a bell for you yet?"

No words.

No words would come to his lips. Mike opened his mouth, and then closed it several times.

"What?" He croaked.

Hopper rolled his eyes and picked up a framed photo from his desk, plunking it down right in front of Mike.

"You're dating one of my daughters, Wheeler. Did you really not know?" Face unreadable, Hopper pointed to one of the young woman in the framed photo. It must have been taken several years ago, but it was unmistakably El.

El: as in the girl Mike had been crushing on for the month and a bit.

El: as in the girl Mike had finally *just* managed to work up the courage to take out on a real date.

El *Hopper* (apparently): as in, the *captain's* daughter.

Holy.

Shit.

A strange, strangled noise between a croak and a squeak wheezed out of Mike. He slowly sank down into his seat.

Hopper eyed him impassively, mercifully giving Mike a moment to collect himself.

How had he not known? Why hadn't he ever asked El's last name?

Well, Mike knew the answer to that. He was so busy being amazed that El was giving him a second look that he hadn't thought to ask that question. Besides, it hadn't come up naturally, and it would have been a strange thing to ask all of a sudden.

"Do I need to call an ambulance?" Hopper prompted.

"I—uh..." What could Mike even say to the captain now? He wracked his brain, trying to think of some of those 90s romcoms Nancy and Holly used to make him watch with them, specifically the key scene where the romantic interest would ask a girl's father permission to date his daughter.

"Sir—I um... I'm dating your daughter. I mean, I took her out on one date and I would like to take her out on more?" Mike's voice came out higher than he would have liked, and the way his voice cracked made it sound more like a question.

Hopper remained silent, neither encouraging him to continue, nor discouraging him.

"I uh... would like permission to—"

Hopper held up a hand that demanded silence.

Mike obeyed unthinkingly and shut his mouth.

"My daughter is capable of making her own choices. As Kali and Detective Mayfield has reminded me time and time again, El is, and I quote, *'a strong, independent woman who don't need no man'*."

It was by *far* one of the strangest things Mike had ever heard come from the Captain's mouth.

"Thank god." Mike slumped in his seat in relief, asking for Hopper's permission to date his grown daughter felt incredibly strange. He straightened a little when he realized that Hopper was still staring at him.

"I mean, I completely agree. About the strong, independent woman thing, sir. El is amazing. She's... she's jus—"

"Geez kid, just because you don't need my permission to date my daughter doesn't mean I want to hear you get all mushy for crying out loud." Hopper sighed, running a hand down his face as

Mike went beet red.

"Will this affect your work?" Hopper asked a moment later.

"No sir." Mike shook his head vehemently.

"Let's try and keep our relationship professional for as long as we can." Hopper sighed, "I don't need to be having you over for Sunday brunch anytime soon you hear?"

Mike nodded.

"Dismissed. Let's never talk about you dating my daughter again."

At Hopper's dismissal, Mike nearly made a run for the door, in a state of semi-disbelief that he was still alive.

"One last thing, Wheeler." Hopper's voice stopped him cold.

Mike turned around nervously. "Yes sir?"

"You're never going to live down the hots for Hopper thing." Hopper grinned evilly.

"I know, sir." Mike sighed.

Hopper's laughter followed him across the bullpen.

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A/N: Thank you for your lovely comments, you really made my day!

Apologies for the late posting on this chapter, I had a brain melting head cold that impeded my editing process. When you type the word "skating" in a sentence six times, you know it's time to call it quits.

Hope you enjoyed! If you have a minute, let me know what you thought about this chapter! 3